

The Catholic Primer's

Reference Series:

LETTER TO THE FRIENDS OF THE CROSS

St. Louis de Montfort

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The Catholic Primer



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LETTER TO THE FRIENDS OF THE CROSS

1. Since the divine Cross keeps me in retirement and prevents me from speaking to you personally, I cannot, and I do not even desire to express by word of mouth the feelings of my heart on the excellence and the practices of your Association in the sacred Cross of Christ.

However, on this last day of my retreat, I leave the delights of the interior life to develop on paper a few little points on the Cross with which to pierce your generous hearts. Would to God I could use the blood of my veins rather than the ink of my pen! But, alas, even if blood were required, mine would not be good enough. I pray rather that the Spirit of the living God may be the life, strength, and guiding hand of this letter; that his unction may be my ink, the holy Cross my pen, and your hearts my book.

I. EXCELLENCE OF THE ASSOCIATION

2. Friends of the Cross, you are like crusaders united to fight against the world; not like Religious who retreat from the world lest they be overcome, but like brave and valiant warriors on the battle-field, who refuse to retreat or even yield an inch. Be brave and fight courageously.

You must be joined together in a close union of mind and heart, which is stronger and far more formidable to the world and to hell than are the armed forces of a great nation to its enemies. Evil spirits are united to destroy you; you must be united to crush them. The avaricious are united to make money and amass gold and silver; you must combine your efforts to acquire the eternal treasures hidden in the Cross. Pleasure-seekers unite to enjoy themselves; you must be united to suffer.

A. Greatness of Your Title

3. You call yourselves "Friends of the Cross." What a glorious title! I must confess that I am charmed and captivated by it. It is brighter than the sun, higher than the heavens, more magnificent and resplendent than all the titles given to kings and emperors. It is the glorious title of Jesus Christ, true God and true man. It is the genuine title of a Christian.

4. But, if I am captivated by its splendor, I am no less frightened by its responsibility, for it is a title that embraces difficult and inescapable obligations, summed up in the words of the Holy Spirit, "A chosen race, a royal priesthood, a people set apart."

A Friend of the Cross is one chosen by God, from among thousands who live only according to their reason and senses, to be wholly divine, raised above mere reason and completely opposed to material things, living in the light of pure faith, and inspired by a deep love of the Cross.

A Friend of the Cross is an all-powerful king, a champion who triumphs over the devil, the world and the flesh in their three-fold concupiscence. He crushes the pride of Satan

by his love of humiliations; he overcomes the greed of the world by his love of poverty; he retrains the sensuality of the flesh by his love of suffering.

A Friend of the Cross is one who is holy and set apart from the things that are visible, for his heart is raised above all that is transient and perishable, and his homeland is in heaven; he travels through this world like a visitor and a pilgrim, and, far from setting his heart on it, he looks on it with indifference and tramples it underfoot with contempt.

A Friend of the Cross is a glorious trophy gained by the crucified Christ on Calvary, in union with his holy Mother. He is a Benoni or Benjamin, a child of sorrow and of the right hand, conceived in the suffering heart of Jesus, born from his pierced side, and baptized in his blood. True to his origin, his life embraces the cross, and death to the world, the flesh, and sin, so as to live here below a life hidden with Christ in God.

In short, a perfect Friend of the Cross is a true Christ-bearer, or rather another Christ, so that he can truly say, "I live now not with my own life but with the life of Christ who lives in me."

5. My dear Friends of the Cross, do you live in accordance with the noble title you bear? Or, at least, have you a real desire and a sincere determination to do so with the help of God's grace, under the shelter of Christ's Cross and of our Lady of Sorrows? Are you taking the means necessary for this? Are you walking along the true way of life, which is the narrow and stony way of Calvary? Or are you, without perhaps realizing it, on the wide road of the world which leads to perdition? Are you aware that there is a highway which is to all appearances a straight and safe road, but which really leads to eternal death?

6. Do you clearly distinguish the voice of God and his grace from that of the world and of human nature? Do you listen to the voice of God, our heavenly Father, pronouncing his three-fold malediction on all who follow the desires of the world: "Woe, woe, woe to all the people on earth;" the Father who stretches out his arms to you in loving appeal, "Come out, my chosen people," dear friends of my Son's Cross, away from worldlings, who have been cursed by myself, rejected by my Son, and condemned by my Holy Spirit? Beware of following their counsels, of sitting in their company, or even lingering on the road they take. Hasten away from the infamous Babylon. Listen only to the voice of my beloved Son and follow only him, whom I have given you to be your way, your truth, your life, and your model. (Ipsium audite.) "Listen to him."

Do you listen to the voice of Jesus who, burdened with his Cross, calls out to you, "Come after me; anyone who follows me will not be walking in the dark; be brave; I have conquered the world."?

B. The Two Companies

7. My dear brothers and sisters, there are two companies that appear before you each day: the followers of Christ and the followers of the world.

Our dear Savior's company is on the right, climbing up a narrow road, made all the narrower by the world's immorality. Our Master leads the way, barefooted, crowned with thorns, covered with blood, and laden with a heavy cross. Those who follow him, though most valiant, are only a handful, either because his quiet voice is not heard amid the tumult of the world, or because people lack the courage to follow him in his poverty, sufferings, humiliations and other crosses which his servants must carry all the days of their life.

8. On the left hand is the company of the world or of the devil. This is far more numerous, more imposing and more illustrious, at least in appearance. Most of the fashionable people run to join it, all crowded together, although the road is wide and is continually being made wider than ever by the crowds that pour along it like a torrent. It is strewn with flowers, bordered with all kinds of amusements and attractions, and paved with gold and silver.

9. On the right, the little groups which follow Jesus speak about sorrow and penance, prayer and indifference to worldly things. They continually encourage one another saying, "Now is the time to suffer and to mourn, to pray and do penance, to live in retirement and poverty, to humble and mortify ourselves; for those who do not possess the spirit of Christ, which is the spirit of the cross, do not belong to him. Those who belong to Christ have crucified all self-indulgent passions and desires. We must be true images of Christ or be eternally lost."

"Have confidence," they say to each other. If God is on our side, within us and before us, who can be against us? He who is within us is stronger than the one who is in the world. The servant is not greater than his master. This slight and temporary distress we suffer will bring us a tremendous and everlasting glory. The number of those who will be saved is not as great as some people imagine. It is only the brave and the daring who take heaven by storm, where only those are crowned who strive to live according to the law of the Gospel and not according to the maxims of the world. Let us fight with all our strength, let us run with all speed, that we may attain our goal and win the crown.

Such are some of the heavenly counsels with which the Friends of the Cross inspire each other.

10. Those who follow the world, on the contrary, urge each other to continue in their evil ways without scruple, calling to one another day after day, "Let us eat and drink, sing and dance, and enjoy ourselves. God is good; he has not made us to damn us. He does not forbid us to amuse ourselves. We shall not be damned for so little. We are not to be scrupulous. 'No, you will not die'."

11. Dear brothers and sisters, remember that our loving Savior has his eyes on you at this moment, and he says to each one of you individually, "See how almost everyone deserts me on the royal road of the Cross. Pagans in their blindness ridicule my Cross as foolishness; obstinate Jews are repelled by it as by an object of horror; heretics pull it down and break it to pieces as something contemptible.

"Even my own people - and I say this with tears in my eyes and grief in my heart - my own children whom I have brought up and instructed in my ways, my members whom I have quickened with my own Spirit, have turned their backs on me and forsaken me by becoming enemies of my Cross. 'Will you also go away?' Will you also desert me by running away from my Cross like the worldlings, who thus become so many antichrists? Will you also follow the world; despise the poverty of my Cross in order to seek after wealth; shun the sufferings of my Cross to look for enjoyment; avoid the humiliations of my Cross in order to chase after the honors of the world? 'There are many who pretend they are friends of mine and protest that they love me, but in their hearts they hate me. I have many friends of my table, but very few of my Cross.' (Imit. II, 11, 1)."

12. At this loving appeal of Jesus, let us rise above our human nature; let us not be seduced by our senses, as Eve was; but keep our eyes fixed on Jesus crucified, who leads us in our faith and brings it to perfection (Heb 12.2). Let us keep ourselves apart from the evil practices of the world; let us show our love for Jesus in the best way, that is, through all kinds of crosses. Reflect well on these remarkable words of our Savior, "If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself, and take up his cross and follow me" (Mt 16.24; Lk 9.23).

II. THE PRACTICES OF CHRISTIAN PERFECTION

13. Christian holiness consists in this:

1. Resolving to become a saint: "If anyone wants to be a follower of mine;"
2. Self-denial: "Let him renounce himself;"
3. Suffering: "Let him take up his cross;"
4. Acting: "Let him follow me."

A. If anyone wants to follow me

14. "If anyone," says our Lord, to point out the small number of chosen ones willing to conform themselves to Christ crucified by carrying their cross. Their number is so small that we would be dumbfounded if we knew it. It is so small that there is scarcely one in ten thousand, as has been revealed to several saints, including St. Simon Stylites (as is related by Abbot Nilus), St. Basil, St. Ephrem and others. It is so small that, should it please God to gather them together, he would have to call them one by one as he did of old through his prophet, "You will be gathered one by one;" one from this country, one from that province.

15. "If anyone wants," if anyone has a genuine desire, a determination, not prompted by nature, habit, self-love, self-interest, or human respect, but by the all-conquering grace of the Holy Spirit, which is not given to everyone. "It is not given to all men to know this mystery."

In fact, only a few people have the knowledge of how to live out the mystery of the Cross in daily life. For a man to climb Mount Calvary and allow himself to be nailed to the cross with Christ in the midst of his own people, he must be courageous, heroic, resolute; one who is close to God, and treats with indifference the world and the devil, his own body and his own desires; one who is determined to leave all things, to undertake all things, and to suffer all things for Christ.

You must realize, my dear Friends of the Cross, that should there be anyone among you without this determination, he is only walking on one foot, flying with one wing. He is not worthy to be one of your company, since he is not worthy to be called a Friend of the Cross, which we must, like Jesus, love "with a generous mind and a willing heart."

It only needs one half-hearted member to spoil the whole group, like a mangy sheep. If such a one has entered your fold through the evil door of the world, then in the name of Christ crucified drive him out as you would a wolf from the flock.

16. "If anyone wants to be a follower of mine." If anyone wants to follow me who so humbled and emptied myself that I became a worm rather than a man; who came into the world only to embrace the Cross, to set it in my heart, to love it from my youth, to long for it all the days of my life, to carry it joyfully, preferring it to all the joys and delights that heaven and earth could offer, and not being content till I had died in its divine embrace.

B. Let him renounce himself

17. If anyone, therefore, wants to follow me thus abased and crucified, he must glory, as I did, only in the poverty, humiliations and sufferings of my Cross. "Let him renounce himself."

Excluded, then, from the company of the Friends of the Cross are those who take pride in their sufferings; the worldly-wise, the intellectuals and the skeptics who are attached to their own ideas and puffed up with their own talents. Away from you those endless talkers who make a great show but produce nothing but vanity. Away from you those so-called devout Catholics who in their pride display the self-sufficiency of proud Lucifer wherever they go, saying, "I am not like the rest of men;" who cannot endure being blamed without making some excuse, being attacked without answering back, being humbled without exalting themselves.

Be careful not to admit into your society those delicate and sensitive people who are afraid of the slightest pin-prick, who cry out and complain at the least pain, who know nothing of the hair-shirt, the discipline or other instruments of penance, and who mingle, with their fashionable devotions, a most refined fastidiousness and a most studied lack of mortification.

C. Let him take up his cross

18. "Let him take up his cross," the one that is his. Let that man (or woman) so rare "far beyond the price of pearls, "take up his cross joyfully, embrace it lovingly, and carry it courageously on his shoulders, his own cross, and not that of another - his own cross which I, in my wisdom, designed for him in every detail of number, measure and weight; his own cross which I have fashioned with my own hands and with great exactness as regards its four dimensions of length, breadth, thickness and depth; his own cross, which out of love for him I have carved from a piece of the one I bore to Calvary; his own cross, which is the greatest gift I can bestow upon my chosen ones on earth; his own cross, whose thickness is made up of the loss of one's possessions, humiliations, contempt, sufferings, illnesses and spiritual trials, which come to him daily till his death in accordance with my providence; his own cross, whose length consists of a certain period of days or months enduring slander, or lying on a sick-bed, or being forced to beg, or suffering from temptations, dryness, desolation, and other interior trials; his own cross, whose breadth is made up of the most harsh and bitter circumstances brought about by relatives, friends, servants; his own cross, whose depth is made up of the hidden trials I shall inflict on him without his being able to find any comfort from other people, for they also, under my guidance, will turn away from him and join with me in making him suffer.

19. "Let him take up," that is, let him carry his cross and not drag it, or shake it off, or lighten it, or hide it. Instead, let him lift it on high and carry it without impatience or annoyance, without intentional complaint or grumbling, without hesitation or concealment, without shame or human respect.

"Let him take it up" and set it on his brow, saying with St. Paul, "The only thing I can boast about is the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Let him carry it on his shoulders like our Lord, that it may become the source of his victories and the scepter of his power: "Dominion is laid upon his shoulders."

Let him set it in his heart, where it may, like the burning bush of Moses, burn day and night with the pure love of God without being consumed!

20. "The cross": let him carry it, for nothing is so necessary, so beneficial, so agreeable, or so glorious as to suffer something for Jesus Christ.

Nothing is so necessary

21. Dear Friends of the Cross, we are all sinners; there is not one of us who has not deserved hell, and I more than anyone. Our offences have to be punished either in this world or in the next. If we suffer for them now, we shall not suffer for them after death. If we willingly accept punishment for them, this punishment will be an act of God's love; for it is mercy which holds sway and chastises in this world, and not strict justice. This punishment will be light and temporary, accompanied by consolation and merit, and followed by rewards both here and in eternity.

22. But if the punishment due for our sins is put off till the next world, then it will be God's avenging justice, which puts everything to fire and sword, which will inflict the punishment, a dreadful, indescribable punishment: "Who understands the power of your anger?" Judgment without mercy, without relief, without merit, without limit and without end. Yes, without end. That serious sin you committed in a few brief moments, that deliberate evil thought which now escapes your memory, that word carried away by the wind, that brief action against the law of God - they shall all be punished for eternity, in the company of the devils in hell, so long as God is God. And this avenging God will have no pity on your torments, on your cries and tears, violent enough to cleave the rocks. To suffer forever, without merit, without mercy, and without end.

23. Do we think of this, my dear brothers and sisters, when we have to suffer some trial in this world? How fortunate we are to be able to exchange a never-ending and unprofitable punishment for a temporary and rewarding one just by bearing our cross with patience! How many of our debts are still unpaid! How many sins have we committed which, despite a sincere confession and heartfelt contrition, will have to be atoned for in purgatory for many years, simply because in this world we contented ourselves with a few slight penances!

Ah, let us settle our debts with good grace in this life by cheerfully carrying our cross. In the next, a strict account is demanded down to the last penny, to the last idle word. If we were able to snatch from the devil the book of death in which he has entered all our sins and the punishment due to them, what a heavy debt we should find, and how delighted we should be to suffer for long years on earth rather than a single day in the world to come!

24. Friends of the Cross, do you not flatter yourselves that you are, or desire to become, the friends of God? Well then, resolve to drink the cup that you must drink in order to become his friends: "They drank the cup of the Lord and became the friends of God." Benjamin, the beloved son of Jacob, was given the cup, while his other brothers received nothing but wheat. The beloved disciple of Christ, so dear to his Master's heart, went up to Calvary and drank of his cup. "Can you drink the cup that I am going to drink?" To desire God's glory is excellent, but to desire and pray for it without resolving to suffer all things is both foolish and extravagant: "You do not know what you are asking..." "We must experience many hardships before we enter the kingdom of heaven." To enter this kingdom you must suffer many crosses and tribulations.

25. Rightly you glory in being God's children. You should glory, then, in the correction your heavenly Father has given you and will give you in the future, for he chastises all his children. If you are not included among his beloved children, you are, alas, included among those who are lost, as St. Augustine points out. He also tells us, "The one who does not mourn in this world like a stranger and a pilgrim will not rejoice in the world to come as a citizen of heaven."

If your heavenly Father does not send you some worthwhile crosses from time to time, it is because he no longer cares about you and is angry with you; he is treating you as an outsider, no longer belonging to his family and deserving his protection, or as an illegitimate child, who, having no claim to a share of the inheritance, deserves neither care nor correction.

26. Friends of the Cross, disciples of a crucified God, the mystery of the Cross is a mystery unknown to the Gentiles, rejected by the Jews, and despised by heretics and bad Catholics. But it is the great mystery you must learn to practice in the school of Christ, and which can only be learnt from him. You will look in vain in all the schools of ancient times for a philosopher who taught it; in vain you will appeal to the senses or to reason to throw some light on it. It is only Jesus, through his all-powerful grace, who can teach you this mystery and give you the ability to appreciate it. Strive then to become proficient in this all-important science under your great Master, and you will understand all other sciences, for it contains them all in an eminent degree. It is our natural and supernatural philosophy, our divine and mystic theology, our philosopher's stone, which by patience transforms the basest metals into precious ones, the bitterest pains into delight, poverty into riches, the most profound humiliations into glory. 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 the angels, and he proclaimed that he did not know, nor did he want to know anything but Christ crucified. Rejoice, then, you ordinary Christian, man or woman, without any schooling or intellectual abilities, for if you know how to suffer cheerfully, you know more than a doctor of Sorbonne University who does not know how to suffer as you do.

27. You are the members of Christ, a wonderful honor indeed, but one which entails suffering. If the Head is crowned with thorns, can the members expect to be crowned with roses? If the Head is jeered at and covered with dust on the road to Calvary, can the members expect to be sprinkled with perfumes on a throne? If the Head has no pillow on which to rest, can the members expect to recline on feathers and down? That would be unthinkable!

No, no, my dear Companions of the Cross, do not deceive yourselves. Those Christians you see everywhere, fashionably dressed, fastidious in manner, full of importance and dignity, are not real disciples, real members of Christ crucified. To think they are would be an insult to our thorn-crowned Head and to the truth of the Gospel. How many so-called Christians imagine they are members of our Savior when in reality they are his treacherous persecutors, for while they make the sign of the cross with their hand, in their hearts they are its enemies!

If you are guided by the same spirit, if you live with the same life as Jesus, your thorn-crowned Head, you must expect only thorns, lashes and nails; that is, nothing but the cross; for the disciple must be treated like the master and the members like the head.

And if you were to be offered, as was St. Catherine of Sienna, a crown of thorns and one of roses, you should, like her, choose the crown of thorns without hesitation and press it upon your head, so as to be like Christ.

28. You know that you are living temples of the Holy Spirit and that, like living stones, you are to be set by the God of love into the building of the heavenly Jerusalem. And so you must expect to be shaped, cut and chiseled under the hammer of the cross; otherwise, you would remain rough stones, good for nothing but to be cast aside. Be careful that you do not cause the hammer to recoil when it strikes you; respect the chisel that is carving you and the hand that is shaping you. It may be that this skilful and loving craftsman wants you to have an important place in his eternal edifice, or to be one of the most beautiful works of art in his heavenly kingdom. So let him do what he pleases; he loves you, he knows what he is doing, he has had experience. His strokes are skilful and directed by love; not one will miscarry unless your impatience makes it do so.

29. The Holy Spirit compares the cross sometimes to a winnowing-fan which separates the grain from the chaff and the dust. Like the grain before the fan, let yourselves be shaken up and tossed about without resisting; for the Father of the household is winnowing you and will soon put you in his granary. At other times the Holy Spirit compares the cross to a fire which removes the rust from the iron by the intensity of its heat. Our God is a consuming fire dwelling in our souls through his cross in order to purify them without consuming them, as he did of old in the burning bush.

Again, he likens the cross to the crucible of a forge in which the good metal is refined and the dross vanishes in smoke; the metal is purified by fire, while the impurities disappear in the heat of the flames. And it is in the crucible of tribulation and temptation that the true friends of the cross are purified by their constancy in sufferings, while its enemies are swept away through their impatience and murmuring.

30. My dear Friends of the Cross, see before you a great cloud of witnesses who, without saying a word, prove what I have been saying. Consider, for example, that upright man Abel, who was killed by his brother; and Abraham, an upright man who was a stranger on earth; Lot, an upright man driven from his own country; Jacob, an upright man persecuted by his brother; Tobit, an upright man stricken with blindness; Job, an upright man who was impoverished, humbled, and covered with sores from head to foot.

31. Consider the countless apostles and martyrs who were bathed in their own blood; the virgins and confessors who were reduced to poverty, humbled, persecuted or exiled. They can all say with St. Paul, "Look upon Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith," the faith we have in him and in his Cross; it was necessary that he should suffer and so enter through the Cross into his glory.

At the side of Jesus, see Mary his Mother, who was never stained with any sin, original or actual, yet whose pure and loving heart was pierced through. If I had time to dwell on the sufferings of Jesus and Mary, I could show that what we suffer is nothing compared to theirs.

32. Who, then, would dare claim to be exempt from the cross? Which of us would not hasten to the place where he knows the cross awaits him? Who would refuse to say with St. Ignatius of Antioch, "Come, fire and gibbet, wild beast and all the torments of hell, that I may delight in the possession of Christ."

33. But if you are not willing to suffer patiently and carry your cross with resignation like God's chosen ones, then you will have to carry it, grumbling and complaining like those on the road to damnation. You will be like the two oxen that drew the Ark of the Covenant, lowing as they went; like Simon of Cyrene who unwillingly took up the very cross of Christ and did nothing but complain while he carried it. And in the end you will be like the impenitent thief, who from the summit of his cross plunged into the abyss.

No, this accursed earth on which we live is not destined to make us happy; in this land of darkness we cannot expect to see clearly; there is no perfect calm on this stormy sea; we can never avoid conflicts on this field of trial and battle; we cannot escape being scratched on this thorn-covered earth. Willingly or unwillingly, all must carry their cross, both those who serve God and those who do not. Keep in mind the words of the hymn:

Three crosses stand on Calvary's height;
One must be chosen, so choose aright;
You must suffer like a saint or repentant thief,
Or like a reprobate, in endless grief.

That is to say, if you are not willing to suffer gladly like Jesus, or patiently like the penitent thief, then you will have to suffer like the unrepentant thief. You will have to drink the cup of bitterness to the dregs without the consoling help of grace, and you will have to bear the whole weight of your cross, deprived of the powerful support of Christ. You will even have to carry the deadly weight which the devil will add to it by means of the impatience it will cause you. And after sharing the unhappiness of the impenitent thief on earth, you will share his misery in eternity.

Nothing is so useful and so agreeable

34. But if, on the contrary, you suffer in the right way, the cross will become a yoke that is easy and light, since Christ himself will carry it with you. It will give you wings, as it were, to lift you to heaven; it will become your ship's mast, bringing you smoothly and easily to the harbor of salvation.

Carry your cross patiently, and it will be a light in your spiritual darkness, for the one who has never suffered trials is ignorant.

Carry your cross cheerfully, and you will be filled with divine love; for only in suffering can we dwell in the pure love of Christ.

Roses are only found among thorns. It is the cross alone which nourishes our love of God, as wood is the fuel which feeds the fire. Remember the beautiful saying in the "Imitation of Christ", "In proportion as you do violence to yourself, by suffering patiently, so will you make progress" in divine love.

Do not expect anything from those sensitive and slothful people who reject the cross when it approaches them, and who are careful not to seek out crosses. What are they but an untilled soil which will produce nothing but thorns because it has not been dug up, harrowed and turned over by an experienced farmer? They are like stagnant water, which is unfit for either washing or drinking.

Carry your cross cheerfully and you will draw from it an all-powerful strength which none of your enemies will be able to resist, and you will find in it a delight beyond anything you have known. Indeed, brethren, the true earthly paradise is found in suffering for Christ.

Ask any of the saints, and they will tell you they have never tasted a banquet more delicious for the spirit than when undergoing the severest torments. "Let all the torments of the devil come upon me," said St. Ignatius the Martyr. "Let me suffer or die," said St. Teresa of Avila. "Not death but suffering," said St. Mary Magdalene of Pazzi. "May I suffer and be despised for your sake," said Blessed John of the Cross. And many others have spoken in the same terms, as we read in their lives.

My dear brothers and sisters, have faith in the word of God, for the Holy Spirit tells us that when we suffer cheerfully for God, the cross is the source of every kind of joy for all kinds of people. The joy that comes from the cross is greater than that of a poor man who suddenly comes into a fortune, or of a peasant who is raised to the throne; greater than the joy of a trader who becomes a millionaire; than of a military leader over the victories he has won; than of prisoners released from their chains. In short, imagine the greatest joy that can be experienced on earth, and then realize that the happiness of the one who bears his sufferings in the right way contains, and even surpasses, all of them.

Nothing is so glorious

35. So rejoice and be glad when God favors you with one of his choicest crosses; for without realizing it, you are blessed with the greatest gift of heaven, the greatest gift of God. If you really appreciated it, you would have Masses offered, you would make novenas at the shrines of the saints, you would undertake long pilgrimages, as did the saints, to obtain from heaven this divine gift.

36. The world calls this madness, degradation, stupidity, a lack of judgment and of common sense. They are blind: let them say what they like. This blindness, which makes them view the cross in a human and distorted way, is a source of glory to us. Every time they cause us to suffer by their ridicule and insults, they are presenting us with jewels, setting us on a throne, and crowning us with laurels.

37. More than that ... as St. John Chrysostom says, "All the wealth and honors and scepters and jeweled crowns of kings and emperors are not to be compared with the splendor of the cross." It is greater even than the glory of an apostle or evangelist. "If I had the choice," continues this holy man, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, "I would willingly leave heaven in order to suffer for the God of heaven. I would prefer dungeons and prisons to the thrones of the highest heaven, and the heaviest of crosses to the glory of the seraphim. I value the honor of suffering more than the gift of miracles, giving me the power to command evil spirits, shake the elements of the world, halt the sun in its course, or raise the dead to life. St. Peter and St. Paul are more glorious in their prison chains than in being caught up into the third heaven or receiving the keys of heaven."

38. Indeed, is it not the Cross which has given to Jesus Christ "the name which is above all other names, so that all beings in the heavens, on earth and in the underworld should bend the knee at the name of Jesus?" The glory of one who knows how to suffer is so great that heaven, angels and men, and even God himself, gaze on him with joy as a most glorious sight. And if the saints in heaven desired anything, it would be to return to earth so as to bear some crosses.

38. But if this glory is so great even on earth, what will it be in heaven? Who could describe it? Who could ever understand fully that eternal weight of glory which a single moment spent in cheerfully carrying a cross obtains for us? Who could understand the glory gained in heaven by a year, and sometimes a whole lifetime, of crosses and suffering?

40. You can be sure, my dear Friends of the Cross, that something wonderful is awaiting you, since the Holy Spirit has united you so intimately to that which everyone so carefully avoids. And you can be sure, too, that God will make of you as many saints as there are Friends of the Cross if you are faithful to your vocation and willingly carry your cross as Christ did.

D. Let him follow me

41. But to suffer is not enough; the evil one and the world have their martyrs. We must suffer and carry our cross in the footsteps of Christ: "Let him follow me," that is to say, we must suffer the way Jesus did. To help you to do that, here are the rules to be followed:

The fourteen rules

Not to deliberately cause crosses, by one's own fault

42. 1) Do not deliberately contrive to bring crosses upon yourself. We must not do something wrong in order to bring about something good; nor must we, without a special inspiration of God, do things badly so as to draw down ridicule upon ourselves. Rather we ought to imitate our Lord, of whom it was said, "He did all things well," not indeed out of self-esteem or vanity, but to please God and win over our fellow-men. And if you fulfill

your duties as well as you can, you will find no lack of opposition, criticism and ridicule, which will be sent by divine providence without your choosing or wanting it.

Be aware of one's neighbor's good

43. 2) If you happen to do something which is neither good nor bad in itself, and your neighbor takes scandal at it - although without reason - refrain from doing it, out of charity to him, so as to avoid the scandal of the weak. Such an heroic act of charity will be of greater worth in God's sight than the action you were doing or intending to do. However, if what you are doing is necessary or beneficial to your neighbor, and some hypocritical or evil-minded person takes scandal without reason, refer the matter to some prudent adviser to find out whether it is really necessary or advantageous to the neighbor. If he judges it is, then carry on without worrying about what people say, so long as they do not stop you. And you can say to them what our Lord said to some of his disciples when they told him that the scribes and Pharisees were scandalized at what he said and did: "Leave them alone. They are blind men leading the blind."

Admire the sublime virtue of the saints without pretending to attain to it

44. 3) Although certain great and holy men have sought and asked for crosses, and even by their peculiar behavior have brought sufferings, scorn and humiliations upon themselves, let us be content with admiring and praising the marvelous work of the Holy Spirit in their souls. Let us humble ourselves at the sight of such sublime virtue without attempting to reach such heights ourselves. Compared with those swift eagles and strong lions, we are timid and faint-hearted sheep.

Ask God for the wisdom of the cross

45. 4) 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. But this is obtained only by much labor, great humiliations and fervent prayer. If you stand in need of this strengthening spirit which enables us to carry the heaviest crosses courageously; of this gracious and consoling spirit, which enables us, in the higher part of the soul, to take delight in things that are bitter and repulsive; of this sound and upright spirit which seeks God alone; of this science of the cross which embraces all things; in short, of this inexhaustible treasure by which those who make good use of it win God's friendship - if you stand in need of such, pray for wisdom, ask for it continually and fervently without wavering or fear of not obtaining it, and it will be yours. Then you will clearly understand from your own experience how it is possible to desire, seek and find joy in the cross.

Humble oneself for one's faults, without worrying

46. 5) If you make a blunder which brings a cross upon you, whether it be inadvertently or even through your own fault, bow down under the mighty hand of God without delay, and as far as possible do not worry over it. You might say within yourself, "Lord, here is a

sample of my handiwork." If there is anything wrong in what you have done, accept the humiliation as a punishment for it; if it was not sinful, accept it as a means of humbling your pride. Frequently, even very frequently, God allows his greatest servants, those far advanced in holiness, to fall into the most humiliating faults so as to humble them in their own eyes and in the eyes of others. He thus keeps them from thoughts of pride in which they might indulge because of the graces they have received, or the good they are doing, so that "no-one can boast in God's presence."

God humbles us to purify us

47. 6) You must realize that through the sin of Adam and through the sins we ourselves have committed, everything in us has become debased, not only our bodily senses, but also the powers of our soul. And so the moment our corrupt minds reflect with self-complacency on any of God's gifts within us, that gift, that action, that grace becomes tarnished and spoilt, and God no longer looks on it with favor. If the thoughts and reflections of the mind can so spoil man's best actions and God's greatest gifts, how much worse will be the evil effects of man's self-will, which are even more corrupt than those of the mind?

So we need not be surprised that God is pleased to hide his friends in the shelter of his presence, that they may not be defiled by the scrutiny of men or by their own self-awareness. And to keep them hidden, what does this jealous God not permit and even bring about! How often he humiliates them! How many faults he allows them to fall into! By what temptations he permits them to be attacked, as St. Paul was! In what uncertainty, darkness and perplexity he leaves them! Oh, how wonderful is God in his saints, and in the means he adopts to lead them to humility and holiness!

Avoid the trap of pride in one's crosses

48. 7) Do not be like those proud and self-conceited church-goers, imagining that your crosses are heavy, that they are proofs of your fidelity and marks of God's exceptional love for you. This temptation, arising from spiritual pride, is most deceptive, subtle and full of poison. You must believe (1) that your pride and sensitiveness make you magnify splinters into planks, scratches into wounds, molehills into mountains, a passing word meaning nothing into an outrageous insult or a cruel slight; (2) that the crosses God sends you are loving punishments for your sins rather than marks of God's special favor; (3) that whatever cross or humiliation he sends you is exceedingly light in comparison with the number and the greatness of your offences, for you should consider your sins in the light of God's holiness, who can tolerate nothing that is defiled, and against whom you have set yourself; in the light of a God suffering death while overwhelmed with sorrow at the sight of your sins; in the light of an everlasting hell which you have deserved time and again; (4) that the patience with which you bear your sufferings is tinged more than you think with natural and human motives. Witness those little ways of looking after yourself, that unobtrusive seeking for sympathy, those confidences you make in such a natural way to your friends, and perhaps to your spiritual director, those specious excuses you are so ready with, those complaints, or rather criticisms of those who have done you an injury,

expressed in such pleasant words and charitable manner, that keen satisfaction you feel on considering your troubles, that self-complacency of Lucifer which makes you imagine you are somebody, and so on. I should never finish if I were to describe here all the twists and turns of human nature, even in suffering.

Profit by little sufferings rather than great ones

49. 8) Take advantage of little sufferings, even more than of great ones. God considers not so much what we suffer as how we suffer. To suffer a great deal, but badly, is to suffer like the damned; to suffer much, even bravely, but for an evil cause, is to suffer as a disciple of the devil; to suffer little or much for God's sake is to suffer like a saint.

If it is true to say that we may have a preference for certain crosses, let it be particularly for small, obscure ones when they come to us at the same time as great and spectacular ones. To seek and ask for great and dazzling crosses, and even to choose and welcome them, may be the result of our natural pride; but to choose small and insignificant ones and bear them cheerfully can only come from a special grace and a great fidelity to God. So do what a shopkeeper does in regard to his business: turn everything to profit. Do not allow the tiniest piece of the true Cross to be lost, even though it be only an insect-sting or a pin-prick, a little eccentricity of your neighbor or some unintentional slight, the loss of some money, some little anxiety, a little bodily weariness, or a slight pain in your limbs. Turn everything to profit, as the grocer does in his shop, and you will soon become rich before God, just as the grocer becomes rich in money by adding penny to penny in his till. At the least annoyance say, "Thank you, Lord. Your will be done." Then store up in God's memory-bank, so to speak, the profitable cross you have just gained, and think no more about except to repeat your thanks.

Love crosses, not with an emotional love, but with rational and supernatural love

50. 9) When we are told to love the cross, that does not refer to an emotional love, impossible to our human nature. There are three kinds of love: emotional love, rational love, and the supernatural love of faith. In other words, the love that resides in the lower part of man, in his body; the love in the higher part, his reason; and the love in the highest part of man, in the summit of the soul, that is, the intelligence enlightened by faith.

51. God does not ask you to love the cross with the will of the flesh. Since the flesh is subject to sin and corruption, all that proceeds from it is perverted and, of itself, cannot be submissive to the will of God and his crucifying law. It was this human will our Lord referred to in the Garden of Olives when he cried out, "Father, let your will be done, not mine." If the lower part of Christ's human nature, although so holy, could not love the cross continuously, then with still greater reason will our tainted nature reject it. It is true that we may sometimes experience even a sensible joy in our sufferings, as many of the saints have done; but that joy does not come from the body, even though it is experienced in the body. It comes from the soul, which is so overwhelmed with the divine joy of the Holy Spirit that it overflows into the body. In that way, someone who is suffering greatly can say with the psalmist, "My heart and my flesh ring out their joy to God, the living God."

52 There is another love of the cross which I have called rational love and which is in the higher part of man, the mind. This love is entirely spiritual; it springs from the knowledge of how happy we can be in suffering for God, and so it can be experienced by the soul, to which it gives interior joy and strength. But although this rational and perceptible joy is good, in fact, excellent, it is not always necessary in order to suffer joyfully for God's sake.

53. And so there is a third kind of love, which is called by the masters of the spiritual life the love of the summit of the soul, and which is known to philosophers as the love of the intellect. In this, without any feeling of joy in the senses or pleasure in the mind, we love the cross we are carrying, by the light of pure faith, and take delight in it, even though the lower part of our nature may be in a state of conflict and disturbance, groaning and complaining, weeping and longing for relief. In this case, we can say with our Lord, "Father, let your will be done, not mine;" or with our Lady, "I am the slave of the Lord: let what you have said be done to me."

It is with one of these two higher loves that we should love and accept the cross.

Suffer all sorts of crosses, without exception and without choice

54. 10) My dear Friends of the Cross, make the resolution to suffer any kind of cross without excluding or choosing any: any poverty, injustice, loss, illness, humiliation, contradiction, slander, spiritual dryness, desolation, interior and exterior trials, saying always, "My heart is ready, O God, my heart is ready." Be prepared, then, to be forsaken by men and angels, and seemingly by God himself; to be persecuted, envied, betrayed, slandered, discredited and abandoned by everyone; to suffer hunger, thirst, poverty, nakedness, exile, imprisonment, the gallows, and all kinds of torture, even though you have done nothing to deserve it.

Finally, imagine that you have been deprived of your possessions and your good name, and turned out of your home, like Job and St. Elizabeth of Hungary; that you are thrown into the mire, like St. Elizabeth, or dragged onto the dung heap, like Job, all covered with ulcers, without a bandage for your sores or a piece of bread to eat - something people would not refuse to a horse or a dog. Imagine that, in addition to all these dreadful misfortunes, God leaves you a prey to every assault of the devil, without imparting to your soul the least feeling of consolation.

You should firmly believe that this is the highest point of heavenly glory and of genuine happiness for the true and perfect Friend of the Cross.

Four considerations for suffering well

55. 11) To help you to suffer in the right spirit, acquire the good habit of reflecting on these four points:

The eye of God

Firstly, the eye of God, who, like a great king from the height of a tower, observes with satisfaction his soldier in the midst of battle, and praises his courage. What is it that attracts God's attention on earth? Is it kings and emperors on their thrones? He often regards them only with contempt. Is it great victories of armies, precious stones, or whatever is great in the eyes of men? No, "what is thought highly of by men is loathsome in the sight of God." What, then, does he look upon with pleasure and satisfaction, and about which he inquires of the angels and even the devils? It is the one who is struggling with the world, the devil, and himself for the love of God, the one who carries his cross cheerfully. As the Lord said to Satan, "Did you not see on earth a great wonder, at which all heaven is filled with admiration? Have you seen my servant Job, who is suffering for my sake?"

The hand of God

56. Secondly, consider the hand of God. All natural evils which befall us, from the smallest to the greatest, come from the hand of God. The same hand that killed an army of a hundred thousand men on the spot also causes a leaf to fall from the tree and a hair from your head; the hand which pressed so heavily on Job gently touches you with a light tribulation. It is the same hand which makes both day and night, sunshine and darkness, good and evil. He has permitted the sinful actions which hurt you; he is not the cause of their malice, but he permits the actions.

If anyone, then, treats you as Shimei treated King David, heaping you with insults and throwing stones at you, say to yourself, "We must not take revenge. Let him carry on, for the Lord has commanded him to act in this way. I know I deserve every kind of insult, and that it is only right that God should punish me. My hands, keep yourselves from violence; refrain, my tongue, from speaking; do not strike, do not say a word. It is true this man attacks me, that woman reviles me, but they are God's representatives, who have come on behalf of his mercy to punish me as his love alone knows how. Let us not offend his justice by usurping his rights to vengeance. Let us not slight his mercy by resisting the loving strokes of his lash, lest he should deliver me, instead, to the absolute justice of eternity."

On the one hand, God in his infinite power and wisdom bears you up, while with the other he afflicts you. With one hand he deals out death, while with the other he dispenses life. He humbles you to the dust and raises you up, and with both arms he reaches from one end of your life to the other with kindness and power; with kindness, by not allowing you to be tempted and afflicted beyond your strength; with power, by supporting you with his grace in proportion to the violence and duration of the temptation or affliction; with power again, by coming himself, as he tells us through his holy Church, "to support you on the edge of the precipice, to guide you on the uncertain road, to shade you in the scorching heat, to protect you in the drenching rain and biting cold, to carry you in your weariness, to aid you in your difficulties, to steady you on slippery paths, to be your refuge in the midst of storms" (Prayer for a Journey).

The wounds and sufferings of Christ crucified

57. Thirdly, reflect on the wounds and sufferings of Christ crucified. He himself has told us, "All you who pass by the way" of thorns and the cross, "look and see." Look with the eyes of your body, and see through the eyes of your contemplation, whether your poverty, destitution, disgrace, sorrow, desolation are like mine; look upon me who am innocent, and lament, you who are guilty!

The Holy Spirit tells us, through the Apostles, to contemplate the crucified Christ. He bids us arm ourselves with this thought, for it is the most powerful and formidable weapon against our enemies. When you are assailed by poverty, disrepute, sorrow, temptation, and other crosses, arm yourselves with the shield, breastplate, helmet and two-edged sword, which is the remembrance of Christ crucified. It is there you will find the solution of every problem and the means to conquer all your enemies.

Heaven above; hell below

58. Fourthly, look upwards and see the beautiful crown that awaits you in heaven if you carry your cross well. It was this reward which sustained the patriarchs and prophets in their faith and persecutions; which inspired the apostles and martyrs in their labors and torments. The patriarchs could say with Moses, "We would rather be afflicted with the people of God, and be happy with him forever, than enjoy for a time the pleasures of sin." And the prophets could say with David, "We suffer persecution for the reward." The apostles and martyrs could say with St. Paul, "We are as men sentenced to death, put on show in front of the whole universe, angels as well as men, by our suffering, and as the offal of the world, the scum of the earth, for the sake of a weight of eternal glory, which this small and temporary suffering will produce in us."

Let us look upwards and see the angels, who exclaim, "Be careful not to forfeit the crown which is marked out for the cross you have received, if you bear it well. If you do not bear it well, another will carry it in the right spirit and will take your crown with it. Fight bravely and suffer patiently, we are told by all the saints, and you will receive an eternal kingdom." Finally, listen to our Lord himself, who says to you, "I will give my reward only to the one who suffers and is victorious through his patience."

Now let us look downward to the place we have deserved and which awaits us in hell in the company of the bad thief and all who have not repented, if we suffer as they did, with feelings of resentment, ill-will and revengefulness. Let us say with St. Augustine, "Lord, treat me as you will in this world for my sins, so long as you pardon them in eternity."

Never complain against creatures

59. 12) Never willingly complain against any person or thing that God may use to afflict you. There are three kinds of complaints we may make in times of distress. The first is

natural and spontaneous, as when the body groans and complains, weeps and laments. There is no fault in this, provided, as I have said, that the heart is resigned to the will of God. The second kind of complaint is that of the mind, as when we make known our ills to someone who can give us some relief, such as a doctor or a superior. There may be some imperfection in this if we are too eager to tell our troubles, but there is no sin in it. The third kind is sinful: that is when we criticize our neighbor either to get rid of an evil which afflicts us or to take revenge on him; or when we willfully complain of what we suffer with impatience and murmuring.

Accept the cross only with gratitude

60. 13) Whenever you receive any cross, always welcome it with humility and gratitude. And when God favors you with a cross of some importance, show your gratitude in a special way, and get others to thank him for you. Follow the example of the poor woman who lost all that she had in an unjust law- suit and immediately offered her few remaining coins to have a Mass said in thanksgiving for her good fortune.

Take up some voluntary crosses

61. 14) If you want to make yourself worthy of the best kind of crosses, that is, those which come to you without your choosing, then under the guidance of a prudent director, take up some of your own accord.

For example, suppose you have a piece of furniture you are fond of, but which is of no use to you. You could give it away to someone who needs it, saying to yourself, "Why should I have things I don't need when Jesus is so poor?"

Or if you have a distaste for a certain kind of food, an aversion for the practice of some particular virtue, or a dislike for some offensive odor, you could take the food, practice the virtue, accept the odor, and thus conquer yourself.

Or again, your fondness for a certain person or thing may be immoderate. Why not see less of that person, or keep away from those things that attract you?

If you have a natural inclination never to miss what is going on, to be always doing things, to be in the limelight, to frequent popular places, then guard your eyes, watch your tongue, and stay where you are.

Have you a natural aversion for certain persons or things? Then overcome it by not avoiding them.

62. If you are truly Friends of the Cross, then, without your knowing it, love, which is ever ingenious, will discover thousands of little crosses to enrich you. And you will not need to have any fear of vainglory, which so often spoils the patience which people exhibit under spectacular crosses. And because you have been faithful in little things, the Lord will place you in charge of greater, according to his promise. That is to say, in charge of the

greater graces he will bestow on you, of the greater crosses he will send you, of the greater glory he will prepare for you....