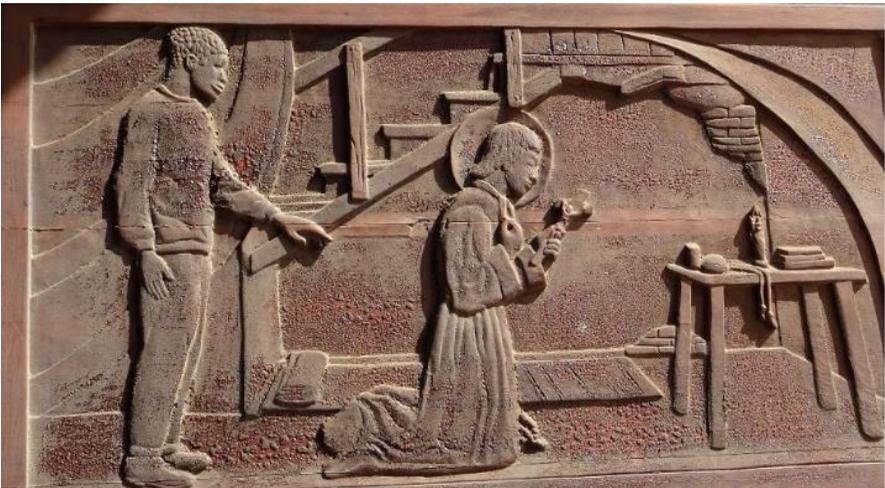




**His penance:
none more austere**



Woodcarving: *Door of the parish church of Balaka (Malawi)*

TO KNOW HIM

The mortified life that Grignon led in Nantes is known from one of his letters (*Letter 10 of November 3, 1701*). He treated himself harshly, not to make up for an unruly youthful life: he had never been either lustful or sensual, or a spendthrift. **He broke the apprehensions of desires with austere life in an ideal of holiness.** He was also influenced by his distrust towards corrupt

man, as perceived in the cultural context of the time. He slept on a straw mattress and limited himself in food.

The Gospel links together fasting and prayer (Mt 17:21): feeling hungry from time to time encourages self-denial in view of greater attention to God. In the community of Saint Clement, Louis did not eat anything in the morning and “not much” in the evening, he wrote to his spiritual director Leschassier. He took only one full meal a day (how many poor people have only one meal a day!). His meal was equivalent to our lunch ordinarily taken at eleven or half past eleven. And when Grignon writes: “I don't eat much in the evening”, he doesn't mean he did not eat anything; rather, he was following the thinking and custom of the people, in taking a good portion of bread, an essential nourishment of the time.

Louis Grignon **practiced also the “discipline”** three times a week. It consisted of striking oneself on the shoulders or torso with a small whip. These religious habits were no cruder than certain medical practices of the time. It was the time of the fight against “humors”, liquid substances elaborated by the human organism, which, according to ancient medical theories, caused various diseases when they were invalidated. The procedures were violent: purges, enemas, bloodletting. Louis Grignon attributes to the discipline healing effects, undoubtedly sedative and rebalancing:

The discipline is medicinal.

Let each one strike his back to the bone.

Let each one strike, strike, strike to the bone.

It's therapy for all ills. (C 161,1)

And again:

All illnesses are cured by it.
Strike, it dispels moods and also pain.
Strike, strike, strike, strike
For all yields to its rigor. (C 161,6)

Montfort limits the duration of this exercise to the length of Psalm 50, which in Latin begins with the word *Miserere* and ends with *vitulos*. The slow reading of this text lasts two and a half minutes. The effort must be endured throughout the psalm:

Innocent soul, strike and sing
The *Miserere* on your back to the bone.
Strike, strike, strike, strike to the bone.
Strike up to *vitulos*. (C 161,9)

(Bernard GUITTENY, *Grignon de Montfort, missionnaire des pauvres*, Cerf, Paris 1993, 146-148)



THE GUIDING WORD

Let us listen to the Word of the Lord
from the first letter of St. Paul the
Apostle to the Corinthians (9:19-27)

“Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I

became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings. Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore, I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize".

LET US MEDITATE

From PSALM 139 (138)

For you formed my inwards parts;
you knitted me together in my mother's womb.

I praise you:
for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works,
my soul knows it very well.

My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

Your eyes saw my unformed substance;
in your book were written, every one of them,
the days that were formed for me,
when as yet there was none of them.

How precious to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!
If I would count them, they are more than the sand.
I awake, and I am still with you.

Search me, O God, and know my heart!
Try me and know my thoughts!
And see if there be any grievous way in me,
and guide me in the way everlasting!

TODAY FOR ME

Certainly, this aspect of St. Louis' life does not resonate with us and raises questions. But I believe that we must understand it well and apply it to our lives and our sensitivities today. Moreover, in his suggestions for obtaining the gift of Wisdom, that is, the profound and vital encounter with Christ the Lord, he proposes as a third means “**a universal mortification**”. In chapter XVI of his booklet, *The Love of Eternal Wisdom*, he explains well

the meaning of gestures which, as we have seen, he also practiced throughout his life. “**Wisdom** – says the Holy Spirit – **is not found in the hearts of those who live in comfort, gratifying their passions and bodily desires, because they who are of the flesh cannot please God ...**” (LEW 194).

And further on he adds: “**Wisdom is not satisfied with half-hearted mortification or mortification of a few days, but requires one that is total, continuous, courageous and prudent, if he is to give himself to us**” (LEW 196).

The examples he gives to indicate what this “**mortification**” consists of are interesting: “In order to possess Wisdom we must either give up actually our worldly possessions as did the apostles, the disciples and the first Christians, and as religious do now – this is the quickest, the best and the surest means to possess Wisdom – or at least we must detach our heart from material things, and possess them as though not possessing them, not eager to acquire more or being anxious to retain any of them, and not complaining or worrying when they are lost. This is something very difficult to accomplish ... **We must not follow the showy fashions of the world** in our dress, our furniture or our dwellings. Neither must we indulge in sumptuous meals or other worldly habits and ways of living. Be not conformed to this world. Putting this into practice is more necessary than is generally thought ... **We must not believe or follow the false maxims of the world** or think, speak or act like people of the world ... We must flee as much as possible from the company of others, not only from that of worldly people, which is harmful and dangerous, but even from that of religious people when our association with them would be useless and a

waste of time”. The “gossiping” often mentioned by pope Francis!

Only at this point does Montfort speak of the mortifications given to his body. “If we would possess Wisdom, we must mortify the body, not only by enduring patiently our bodily ailments, the inconveniences of the weather and the difficulties arising from other people's actions, but also by deliberately undertaking some **penances and mortifications**, such as fasts, vigils and other austerities practiced by holy penitents”.

But he adds and concludes: “For **exterior and voluntary mortification to be profitable**, it must be accompanied by the mortifying of the judgement and the will through holy obedience, because without this obedience all mortification is spoiled by self-will and often becomes more pleasing to the devil than to God”.

All this seems to be in tune with what is suggested by the catechism for adults of the Italian church, *The truth will set you free*: “**The discipline of feelings/sentiments integrates with the discipline of the body. In concrete terms, the latter includes the following elements: sobriety in food, clothing, comfort, superficial and banal consumption; control of glances and conversations; giving up of useless and dangerous interests; dominion of the sexual instinct. This complex and patient work of purification aims at a progressive unification and internal expansion. It is not a question of creating a void or annulling oneself, in the manner of Eastern ascetic traditions, but of acquiring self-control, to be truly free to give oneself to God and to the brethren, in order to conform ever more to the crucified and risen Christ**” (pages 947-948).

FOR PERSONAL AWARENESS

- I read chapter XVI of the writing of St. Louis, *Love of Eternal Wisdom*.
- Have I ever experienced in my life that a certain discipline contributes to the realization of important decisions? I recall ...
- What area of my life do I need to control and discipline so as not to waste energy and gifts?



LET US PRAY WITH SAINT LOUIS

(from C 39)

Help me, Queen of Heaven,
Help me, most Holy Virgin,
Against the wretched world,
Its human respect and fear,
To conquer them, with your Son,
In spite of all the risks.

O mighty God, lend me a hand,
Your all-powerful hand,
To conquer human respect,
That charming beast.
Trusting in you, my dear Jesus,
I will never be confounded.

Truly I will be blessed
If, living this life,
I am contradicted everywhere
By calumny and envy;
If, despite what they say
And in spite of hell, I carry on.

Ah! let me not be fooled
By this intricate spell;
Let me not be trapped
By this human being, by this cunning
snare
But let me die faithful to your laws
In the shadow of your cross.

Hated by the world and despised,
Contrary to the world's maxims,
Poor, suffering and abandoned,
Burdened with crosses and trials,
But, upheld by your arm
I shall never fall into hell.

If someone is truly converted,
Let him believe me and take up arms,
Let him join rank with me
Against the world and its alarms,
To follow a God victorious
Both on Calvary and in the heavens.