

Fr. Simeon Lourdel Mapeera and the Cross



Beginning of the Way of the Cross at Nabunnya – Good Friday 2016

“For the message of the CROSS is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” (1 Corinthians 1: 18)

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For Ugandans, a photo or painting of Fr. Simeon Lourdel without a ‘cross/crucifix’ wouldn’t be an authentic photo of their beloved ‘Mapeera’, the one who evangelized the Uganda Martyrs and their great-great grandfathers and mothers!

Lubaga Cathedral Catholic Parish has a long tradition of starting the Way of the Cross on Good Friday from Nabunnya, the place where Mapeera died on the 12th May 1890, ending inside the Cathedral. This tradition invites us to reflect on the meaning and attachment that Mapeera had in the Cross of Jesus Christ.

Here are some of the extracts from a book about his biography and letters which can give us some insights into the meaning and importance that Mapeera attached to the Cross. (NB: These extracts will later on be complemented with those in which he speaks about his readiness for ‘martyrdom’).

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From a conversation with one of the family members about his decision to be a missionary to the Blacks in Africa:

“I am going away to preach the Gospel to the Blacks of Africa. Of course I would like to reach the goal, but if God wants me to die before, it is okay, it is up to Him. I also do not expect to live there for more than 10 years!.....I am a fool, but it is the foolishness of the cross.” (From Fr. Nicq in his book “Le Père Lourdel”)

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From one of his letters to his parents in reaction to those who considered him ‘mad’ because of his decision to join the Missionaries of Africa.

“You may be everybody’s laughingstock if you spread the news around that you choose to spend your life for the salvation of mankind; you will be taken for a madman. It is very true, we are mad, but this is, as the Gospel points out, **the madness of the Cross**. How I would wish that all human beings were suffering from such madness! Before I take this first step towards the Sacred Orders, I feel the need of thanking you for all you have done for me. You come next to God on the list of those I must be grateful to. Parents of your type, whose main concern is God’s glory and the spiritual good of their children, don’t grow on trees. I am totally powerless to give you an adequate reward; God will take care of this debt on my behalf, and you won’t lose on the exchange. That is enough by way of preaching, I think, for I am still only a seminarian who is not even tonsured yet. Best greetings from your incorrigible son, Simeon Lourdel”. (Before the feast of Holy Trinity 1873)

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Bidding farewell to his parents and members of the family before leaving to join the Missionaries of Africa (White Fathers) in Algiers in 1874. This is how Fr. Nicq in his book “Le Père Lourdel” narrates this incident:

“...the departure was very painful. Since a number of months, Madame Lourdel was in bed suffering, her life in danger, though always full of trust (in God) and energy. It is amidst these sufferings that she had to sacrifice her son. He (Mapeera) had come home for only two days and was now going to leave her for ever. At the moment of departure, the whole family was gathered around the bed of the sick. The father, in spite his tough character, could not withhold his tears; his brothers, the pious aunt, all tried to console the mother who was crying. The hour had come! The heroic young man, firm in the middle of his sobbing relatives, embraced in turn each one of them, but when he reached his mother, his heart full of sorrow, burst out in tears which he could not hold back. His mother who at that moment was embracing him seemed like not wanting to leave him go free. For a moment, he seemed like not being able to free himself from this great embarrassment! However, he slowly freed himself from her, and started walking away towards the door in tears. Then, he turned and looked back for the last time, **took off the crucifix he was wearing around his neck (and gave it to his mother saying): “Mum, take, this is the One who will console and cure you!”** He then left. He had bid farewell forever to his earthly family.”

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From a letter writing about his forthcoming ordination which was first scheduled for March 17th , 1877 but was changed to 2nd April 1877.

“I shall very probably celebrate my First Mass on Passion Sunday. That is a clear indication that I am called to live a life of sufferings, and I am delighted with the prospect. As long as God gives me the grace to accept willingly all the trials that will come my way in life, can I wish for more? (February 28th , 1877)

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Letter to his priest friend Fr Delrue to explain to him the risks of a journey in the South of the Sahara:

“You insist on offering me a small gift for my ordination to the sub-deaconate. All right, I accept. Since you want to give something I can carry on me and take along with me everywhere, buy for me a missionary cross!! Let this cross be very strong and large enough so that I cannot easily lose it, but not too wieldy so that I can carry it around on me without problem. Try to find for me a way of wearing it around my neck so that it can no longer be removed; so that, once around my neck as a necklace, it cannot be taken away except by beheading me! Then, and only then shall I willingly part with it!” (3rd December, 1875)

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From another letter where he talks about the ‘flag of their caravan’:

“The Carmelite Sisters, in whose chapel I have been celebrating Mass for almost a year, are making the flag under which we are expected to march. For this is a must: every caravan setting out into the African Continent is expected to have its own flag. The flag of our caravan will be the Cross surmounted by a drawing of the Sacred-Heart with Christ’s monogram INRI on one side, and Mary’s monogram on the other. The Sacred Heart is with us, so is Mary; we shall march on with confidence.” (20th April 1878)

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To the Carmelite Sisters:

“Let us gather together at the foot of the Cross and let us try to help one another by praying for one another to carry our cross!” (10th June 1878)

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From the letter to the sub-prioress of the Carmelites of Algiers in which he recommended himself to their prayers:

I am still wearing the little cross you gave me before my departure. One day I laid it astray and I thought I had lost it, and I was very upset. Thank God I found it back and I am again wearing it! Do not forget to recommend me from time to time to Mary, your all-powerful patroness, whom I love to invoke under the title of the ‘Immaculate Conception’. (No date, probably end of 1878 or beginning of 1879; letter no. 9078)

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Letter to his brother monk, Ernest:

“We must always be ready to pass from this life into eternity. Fr Alexander was right to send me a cross. I gladly accept it, but he must help me carrying it by his prayers. This cross is painted of several colours, and that is exactly the cross suitable for a missionary who has several different crosses to bear and who is called to put up with trials of all sorts”. (June 1884)



Religious – Way of the Cross on Good Friday 2016 – Lubaga Cathedral