



Father Philip BOSMANS

(1922 - 2012)

*Died 17 January 2012, in Mortsel (Belgium)
aged 89, with 69 years of Religious Profession.*

Official name: Philip Louis Marie. He was born 1st July 1922 in Gruitrode and went to secondary school from 1934 till 1941 in the montfortian Seminary in Rotselaar. He consequently did his noviciate year and took his first vows on 08/09/42 as a montfortian. Due to the war he stayed in Rotselaar and studied philosophy and partly theology in order to be ordained priest in Oirschot (NL) on 07/03/48. Phil had a large heart for common people, something he inherited from his parents, a very simple family where at some point simple life came very close to poverty. From his youth he cherished this simple life and, I might say, cultivated it ... he would not let it be poisoned by false values, a sort of optimism which was very typical in the postwar years: happiness is to have more, to be more, to act more ... Already from an early age he was fed with the cultivation of the heart by his parents.

In the years he was a student, he met coalminers, listened to them, loved them. His natural ability to go over his limits was encouraged in Rotselaar by the talented Fr. Willy Loop, who would appear later again in his life. These were also the beginning years of the canonization of Montfort which was highly enthusiastically commented in school. This inspired Phil, especially Montfort's preference for the poor. Reflecting on his choice in life he writes in 2001: "I chose to become a montfortian because the message of Grignon de Montfort touched me deeply. He addressed himself to the poor, the small, the outcast and to people who were no longer interested in the Church or ignored by the Church, forgotten ... From Montfort I received my love for Our Lady, Mother of God. Later, I often went to Banneux where I put all my initiatives in the hands of the Virgin of the Poor."

Montfort had taught him that God is present in all people, especially in the small ones. When VTM (Flemish commercial broadcast cooperation) asked me: where did he get the inspiration for his one-liners, what was the reason of their success, I was taken by surprise. It was only afterwards I realized that his simplicity was his strength. He had a touch of God's simplicity in his heart and that's why he could bring a dying candlelight back to fire. He was a man of God amongst his people. It reminds me of one his one-liners: "Give a man a feather and he gets wings". His superiors recognized him as the ideal itinerant missionary and sent him after his ordination to France, also to learn French, but more so to discover the style of the popular missionary. There he came in touch with the priest-labourers. He was very much impressed by their way of living but once back in Belgium he was asked to reinforce a small group of itinerant missionaries. He successfully started his mission with a preference for lower-class neighbourhoods. He listened to them, he prayed with them: "My university is the living human being", he would say later. He wanted young people to accompany him hoping that they in turn would stimulate others. Phil had the gift of the spoken and the written word. Already in 1952 he published his first book, title and subtitles reflect his

passion: "Struggle between heaven and earth. Letters to young companions.", with a quotation of E. Poppe: "Times are so difficult that only saints bring salvation". Looking back later in life, he seems to be more modified, but in fact says something similar: "I am but a small, silly ass but to the world naïve, a dreamer, a loser. But I don't give a damn because I believe in the culture of the heart."

Itinerant missions took place from October till Easter. The then bishop of Liege, Mgr. Kerkhofs, had asked the montfortians to undertake a sort of 'summer itinerant mission', a trip with the statue of Mary of Banneux passing all streets in Limburg, a unique way to keep the faith alive. It was a very tiresome job, every day the same but in different streets: teaching, praying, processions and vigils, in short there was little difference between day and night. This 'broke his neck', a blood disease which appeared to be lethal. He was 32 and his illness would last 3 years. The good priest Martin Aerts and his housekeeper Leontine Franck (angels he called them) took care of him in Horpmaal, the small village where he became ill. Later Phil said: sometimes things that seem disasters happen to be grace.

Since his superiors thought he was no longer good at anything at all, he could do what he liked. Fr. Willy Loop, who in the Netherlands had given a strong structure to the work of wireless preacher Henri De Greve, founder of Bond zonder Naam (Association Without a Name), asked Phil to start something similar in Flanders. It was then that his slumbering talents really started flourishing. One initiative followed the other, without planning, inspired by the needs of the moment: the One-liners, Vitamins for the Heart, Home Anne-Françoise, MIN (Men in Need), and so on. Paradox: he who wanted to become free of all structures, founded an organisation which spread all over the World. He was very much appreciated, especially with his books which are estimated 9 or 10 million copies! What was the secret of his language? I repeat what I wrote in the beginning: the simplicity that our Creator has put in the heart of every human being but which flourished abundantly in Phil.

In 1991 he discreetly withdrew from the Association – he wanted to prevent that by merging with the movement it would collapse. On the 18th December 1993 he had a very bad car accident; and on top of this he had a CVA. He was half paralysed. Against his will he entered his final stage in life. It broke him physically but his inner dynamism remained intact. He was a missionary till the very end. A final quotation: "To let things go that's the secret. This is only possible when you have faith ...". Phil was a bird that fitted in no cage. He needed space ... space to do what? ... he had no idea, it surprised everyone, including himself. And yet he was 'devoted', 'tied' to engagements and to people. His fundamental choices in life were sacred to him, his priesthood, his being a monfortian and his choice for the poor and the victims of injustice. Powerless he searched for release and its source was his steady hope, his belief that love overcomes and breaks all frontiers.

Ulrich Schütz of *Bund ohne Name* in Germany: "Bosmans is a great preacher because no one notices he is preaching. He is spokesman and helper of people in need because he loves them. And he is a hidden mystic, who meets God in silence but who has seen God in the face of people ...". Looking back on Phil's life all those people he moved come into focus, thousands who made the Association possible but also those he mentions when he was completely dependant on decisive moments: his unforgettable parents, priest Martin Aerts and Leontine Franck and all those who surrounded him these last years in Kontich. A special thanks goes to Jef Van Kerckhoven, his special friend and house-mate.