

Legacy of a spiritual master who loved the desert

Eightieth Anniversary of the Death of Charles De-Foucauld

On 1 December 1996, in hundreds of places all over the world, Charles de Foucauld's followers gathered for the 80th anniversary of his death; they did so in their own way, discreetly; they have no distinctive feature, they have blended with the peoples to whom they wish to belong, the anonymous crowd of the poor, the rejected and those "far from God", as de Foucauld used to say the marginalized, or more simply, the common people who lead ordinary lives; they shun the spectacular: they want above all "to belong to the community", as Jesus of Nazareth did in his so-called hidden life.

Since they do not seek great publicity but rather avoid it—to be consistent with their vocation—newspapers and magazines say little about Charles de Foucauld's spiritual heritage. It should also be said that speaking of this legacy raises a further difficulty: in the cause for his beatification, Fr de Foucauld is rightly not considered a "founder" of congregations. Although he scattered to the four winds "rules", "directives" and "counsels", and indicated ways of living the religious or lay life according to Nazareth, in his lifetime he founded no institutions. And his followers are as varied as the members of the Church: priests, men and women religious, lay people, found in very different Church structures, but in their real differences they are all recognizable for the same affinity. The principal leaders of the groups assembled in associations, secular institutes and religious congregations which constitute the "*spiritual family of Charles de Foucauld*" meet every year in Rome or some other part of the world (most recently Haiti) for a week of information and review; in 1996, there were 18 officially approved groups.

To understand them as a whole, rather than presenting them one after the other in an impressionistic panorama, as they are today in their diaspora, it is doubtless better to trace their history vertically, describing their genealogical tree, indicating the branches which gradually grew from the common trunk. This seems the best way to understand the legacy of a man who was assassinated in mysterious circumstances in the middle of the largest desert in the world, during the First World War.

If this assassination was summarily reported in the press, it is because it was a minor event in the political chronicle of the time: de Foucauld was killed by a band of rebels in the pay of France's enemies. When he died, Charles de Foucauld was known only to a small circle, certainly devoted but very far from the idea of taking even the first step to making him known. There was one spiritual group in particular— numbering 48 at his death—which de Foucauld had gathered in a sort of confraternity, and for which he wrote a text that he ceaselessly corrected and rewrote during the last 10 years of his life. This rather florid text, in which the contemporary situation— meaning the infidels in the French colonies—is intermingled with the purest call to the Gospel, in the style of Francis of Assisi, comes after very precise but impracticable rules, as Fr Huvelin was to tell his penitent—drawn up in 1893 to found the Hermits of the Sacred Heart and the Little Brothers and the Little Sisters of the Sacred Heart. Since none of his followers ever succeeded in living these rules—except one for three months!— Charles de Foucauld wrote a text called the Directory for the use of all, priests and lay people alike, gathered under the title of the *Union of the Brothers and Sisters of the Sacred Heart*. A personal return to the Gospel and a spiritual life centred on the Eucharist are asked of them, as well as a commitment to proclaim the Gospel in the way Jesus of Nazareth did: to live the Gospel wherever they might be. But de Foucauld hoped that Christians would live this spirituality where the Gospel was unknown.

From the heart of the Sahara he wrote: "Here there is a need for good people, good Christians of every profession, who would come into close contact with the indigenous people through a thousand daily activities".

At his death the 48 followers who gathered were his friends and acquaintances; a priest of Saint-Sulpice, Fr Laurain, who was a professor at the major seminary of Issy-les-Moulineaux, agreed with some reservation to be the secretary of this "association"; they all felt deep admiration for Fr de Foucauld's personal holiness, but did not see him as the initiator of a spiritual movement or an order.

When de Foucauld died, all the members of the small association maintained that his group was dead too. In 1916 Charles de Foucauld had decided to leave Tamanrasset after the war, "to go wherever it might be necessary, even to France if need be", to organize the association first-hand. His death, in the eyes of Fr Laurain first of all, signed the association's death sentence; they were all in exactly the same spiritual state as the disciples of Emmaus: disoriented.

All save one, *Louis Massignon*. This young university student—he was 34 when de Foucauld died—became a world famous Islamist. Before his conversion he had contacted Charles de Foucauld on a strictly scholarly level in 1906. After his conversion, he wrote to him again. At first de Foucauld wanted him to come and help him in his research and work on the Tuareg language and customs; then, seeing the young convert's zeal, he invited him to become a priest and one day to replace him in Hoggar. Despite the advice of Paul Claudel who was pressing him to answer this call, in 1914 Massignon married, but he had become one of the 48 members of the union and remained closely tied to de Foucauld,¹ in whom he saw "an elder brother who had set out for the desert", a spiritual master.

Massignon was on the front in the Dardanelles when he heard of de Foucauld's death, and the news aroused his enthusiasm: "Foucauld killed in the Sahara. Spurred towards heaven, he ascends inebriated with sacred joy, onto the parapet of the snow-covered trench; he has found the way through, he has arrived!". On his return to France on leave, he did everything in his power to get hold of the text of the *Directory* and then turned to Mons. Livinhac, Superior of the White Fathers, and to the Superior of the Holy Ghost Fathers, Mons. Le Roy, the latter agreed to preside over the *Charles de Foucauld Association* which Massignon wanted to establish.

At the same time, Massignon took the initiative to find Rene Bazin, to ask him to write a biography: "I went to requisition Rene Bazin" he was later to say. This venerable 70-year-old scholar set to work scrupulously, and even went to North Africa; and in 1921, when his book *La vie de Charles de Foucauld explorateur en Maroc, eremite du Sahara* was published, it sold 10,000 copies in two months, and in two years 200,000. If the book is marked by postwar patriotism, which was also to be expressed in Joan of Arc's canonization, and although it was not detached from a specific period of colonialism, it nevertheless draws a good spiritual picture of Fr de Foucauld and presents the essence of his message.

First foundations

This biography — and thus Louis Massignon's enterprising will — gave rise after the First World War to the first group of congregations inspired by Charles de Foucauld. Immediately, a young Frenchwoman born in Tunisia *Suzanne Garde*, read Bazin and saw what de Foucauld had written to one of his priest friends: he had hoped that there would be "some young women or widows eager to consecrate themselves totally to Jesus without joining a convent or wearing a religious habit and ready to dedicate themselves utterly to Jesus as lay nurses in this country sunk² in the direst poverty". Suzanne Garde met Massignon in Paris in 1922. Together with two friends she founded the *Charles de Foucauld Group* and in Tlemcen with two companions, she opened a

school of home economics for young Muslim girls. The Bishop of Oran wanted to make this group a religious congregation, but they clung to their lay status, whose spiritual life was inspired by the *Directory* given them by Massignon. They were very soon to be singled out by the ecclesiastical authorities, who reproved "de Foucauld nurses" for not wearing stockings. After many difficulties, in 1946 the Group established a home for the neediest on the plain of Bone, Algeria. After independence, the group retired to France, near Agen, and followed its original vocation.

Other foundations sprang up, for example the *Nurses of Our Lady of Carthage*, a contemplative community which cared for Arab women. *Albert Peyriguere*, a priest from Bordeaux, who had also read Bazin, arrived in Ghardaia in 1926; then the following year he settled in Morocco, at El Kbab, where he was to remain (for more than 30 years) until he died, living as a *missionary monk* in the style of Fr de Foucauld.

Several seminarians from Issy-les-Moulineaux, who had also read Bazin began in 1926 seriously to consider following Fr de Foucauld and the rule he had written in 1899 for the Little Brothers of the Sacred Heart. Their project took shape gradually. Their clothing with the religious habit—there were five of them and they were then known as the Little Brothers of Solitude and would shortly be called the *Little Brothers of Jesus*—took place in the basilica of Montmartre on 8 September 1933. Fr *Rene Voillaume* was their temporary superior, they left Paris to found their first fraternity in El Abiadh Sidi Cheikh in South Oran.

The five Little Brothers were in touch with the Charles de Foucauld Association and therefore with Louis Massignon, who was the constant reference point for everyone, men and women, who wished to follow in de Foucauld's footsteps. Massignon, who in 1922 had provided *La Vie Spirituelle* as the key to his friend's message, succeeded in overcoming ecclesiastical reticence and published the *Directory* at his own expense in 1928, the only writing which Charles de Foucauld had never thought of publishing and had remained unfinished at his death.³ Massignon always considered this text "the deposit" received from his friend, he never ceased to refer to it, to defend it, to recall it in the face of any deviation or tepidity in the Foucauldian work.

While the seminarians of Issy were coming to know his work, de Foucauld's message was understood again through Bazin by a widow of Belgian origin, Mrs. *Capart*. After the death of her husband in 1928, she formed a relationship with the Association and with Louis Massignon. After her novitiate with the Trappistines, Sr. Marie Charles Capart founded the *Little Sisters of the Sacred Heart* in Montpellier in August 1933. In 1936 *Little Sister Magdeleine* settled in Boghari, Algeria, with one companion: the *Little Sisters of Jesus* came into being.

These first religious congregations, the Little Sisters of the Sacred Heart the Little Brothers of Jesus and the Little Sisters of Jesus, were to develop during the Second World War and grow in the years following. The book by Rene Voillaume *Au coeur des masses*, published in 1950 in the same series as *France, pays de mission?*, which had appeared a few years earlier, helped greatly to form a second wave of Foucauldian spirituality which witnessed the flowering of three religious congregations and the birth of various "Fraternities": the *Priestly Fraternity of Diocesan Priests* (with Mons. G. Riobe among others), the *Secular Fraternity* and the *Fraternity of Lay Consecrated Women* (a group which would later split and take different names). In November 1955 the leaders of the foundations that sprang from Fr de Foucauld's message met in Beni-Abbes, and the old Charles de Foucauld Association was reformed, becoming the *Charles of Jesus-Father de Foucauld Association*, which sought among other things "to express the unity of the spirituality which animates the different groups".

Louis Massignon was present at Beni-Abbes. He recalled his first meeting with Charles de Foucauld, the night of adoration (21-22 February 1909) spent with him in the Basilica of the Sacred Heart at Montmartre in Paris, as the beginning of the first group (48 persons at de

Foucauld's death), the stock from which all was started. At the time when the different "fraternities" came into being Massignon kept centred on the *Directory* a particular group which represented the eremitical spirit of de Foucauld, who until his death had wished to have companions and to be a founder, but who was alone at the end. For Massignon, this eremitical spirit consisted in living the evangelical counsels of the Directory wherever one was, in full human contact, in real solitude — since the members of what he called the *Sodality* were bound to one another by Fr de Foucauld's charism in the communion of saints. This *Sodality*, described by Massignon as "the humblest Foucauldian affiliation", this first, very original group,⁴ which had not ceased, with him, to be the benchmark for the group of the Sahara hermit's followers, was discreetly at the heart of the Beni-Abbes meeting and its strength.

In 1956 the *Little Brothers of the Gospel* came into being and in 1963 the *Little Sisters of the Gospel*. These two groups, which had their origins in the Little Sisters and Little Brothers of Jesus, are more directly active than their predecessors, especially in evangelization and the service of the very poor. Then the *Little Sisters of Nazareth* (1966) were founded in Belgium, in the style of the Young Christian Workers. In 1968, a lay group came into being, *the Community of Jesus*. In 1969 the *Little Brothers of the Jesus Caritas Community* was started and was followed by four other religious congregations: the *Little Brothers* (1976) and the *Little Sisters of the Incarnation* (1985) in Haiti, the *Little Brothers of the Cross* (1980) in Quebec, Canada, and the *Little Sisters of the Heart of Jesus* (1977) in Central Africa. During the Council the *Fraternity of Little Bishops* was formed: more than 30 Bishops from Asia, Africa, Latin America and Europe, all followers of Fr de Foucauld, had the habit of meeting to pray together in those years of the Council;⁵ they also followed a "rule". Their fraternity is still in existence.

Characteristics of his spirituality

What appears at first sight in these figures⁶ and places is the paradox between the small number of members— compared, for example, to the congregations which stemmed from Francis of Assisi—and the truly global extension of the fraternities.

In fact, Fr de Foucauld's followers thoroughly understood his self-definition as the "universal brother" from his arrival and his settling in Beni-Abbes in 1901: "The buildings are called the *khaoua*", (the fraternity), because *khaouia* Charles is the "universal brother". "Pray to God that I may truly be the brother of all the souls in this country".⁷ And all the groups that have taken their origin from him have always been firmly determined to reach every corner of the world, desiring, like their founder, to follow Christ who commanded his disciples "to go ... and make disciples of all nations".⁸

Thus de Foucauld's disciples wish to be "universal brothers" like him, each wherever he may be, and in addition they want to demonstrate the universality of the love of Christ's Heart, so that it may be recognized in such a way that all can accept his Word and his Gospel.

De Foucauld was intensely concerned about universal salvation and in 1902 he wrote: "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me". "If we save the soul of an infidel, it is, if one can say so, Jesus whom we are saving from hell and to whom with God's help we are giving heaven; a passionate desire to save souls: to order everything to this end, to do everything for this".

For him, the poorest were those who live in material and in spiritual wretchedness, and in the latter case, the most "rejected".⁹ The constant insistence of Charles de Foucauld's followers is directed inseparably to those who are "furthest from God" and those most rejected by men.

Fr Huvelin's phrase that had so impressed de Foucauld immediately after his conversion— "Jesus took such a humble place that no one will be able to take it from him"—is one which every follower of Charles de Foucauld has kept in mind and is part of his profound spirituality. The groups born of de Foucauld are part of a definite current within Catholicism, which emphasizes Christ's incarnation and humanity and includes Francis of Assisi, Ignatius of Loyola and Francis de Sales: "God came among us, he was united to us lived with us in the most familiar and closest contact", Charles de Foucauld wrote.¹⁰

"Nazareth" suddenly became a key word for de Foucauld's disciples. For them it means sharing the life of men and, like the Son of God, leading an ordinary, everyday human life. Here, we do not find a desire for incarnation which would suggest that the Christian and his Church are separated from the world, external to the Lord; but instead, we contemplate Jesus, who lived an ordinary human life in Nazareth. From this de Foucauld and his followers concluded that the *fuga mundi* is not their destiny, that this world where the Son of God lived is good, and that it is good for us to live in it too, profoundly, to the point of dying in it so as to transfigure it like "the grain of wheat [that] falls into the earth and dies", the Gospel phrase constantly repeated by de Foucauld and taken up by his followers. Here, hiddenness is not the opposite of what is visible: it is insistence on the need to be in the world and to undertake fully the work of evangelization. Charles de Foucauld makes it clear that Francis of Assisi wished to imitate Jesus' public life, while he himself wants to imitate his hidden life. But this imitation of the hidden life is in no way a non-response to the world or a withdrawal from evangelization; for him, it is a question of bringing Christ to "those who do not know him" "preaching not with words, but by example".¹¹ For him, "the hidden life has not been imitated":¹² it is actually the life he wants to lead in the Church, and his disciples with him. In no way is it hiding as an end in itself, but a striving for fruitfulness: the grain of wheat must die if "it is to bear much fruit".¹³

Jesus' disciples want to transform this death, a death to self, a death "to all that is not Jesus",¹⁴ into a type of evangelization involving two important points. The first is that of time, of patient waiting; de Foucauld spoke of his task in the Sahara as a work "of preparation, of the first tilling":¹⁵ "There are too few missionaries serving as tillers; I would like them to be many".¹⁶ De Foucauld's disciples share this sense of patient waiting with him who, in speaking of his daily duties, said: "All this is to arrive at Christianity, God knows when, perhaps after a few centuries".¹⁷

If one axis consists in that sense of waiting and great patience which is the opposite of a craving for immediate and spectacular conversion, the other axis can be defined by the sense of goodness. Starting in 1922, in an article in *La Vie Spirituelle*, Massignon insisted on the "delicate inventions conceived by the ingenious goodness of de Foucauld" as shown in Bazin's biography; and the word "goodness" recurs constantly in the Directory,¹⁸ that evangelical vademecum for use by all the baptized. It is a simple goodness, without undue concern for conversion, a "goodness without ideologies", very close to that expressed by Levinas,¹⁹ which is always addressed to a specific human being in his daily life, a friendship in return for friendship, which gives rise to trust.²⁰ The disciples of Fr de Foucauld are marked by this desire for gratuitous, discreet goodness.

The acceptance of long delays and a long-term mission, and the desire to strictly respect the culture and convictions of others, could lead one to think that de Foucauld's disciples, with a sort of twofold quietism of intentional gentleness, are not present in the world with sufficient intensity and do not bear adequate witness to the Gospel; and that they apply too literally what de Foucauld told a layman from Lyons: "Banish the militant spirit from our midst".²¹ This term, stressed by de Foucauld, is used by him in its etymological sense: the old soldier does not want to "take up arms" but to engage only, he says, in the "apostolate of goodness". And at the secular level, de Foucauld asked his friends, as he wrote on 21 February 1915 to Massignon, to co-operate in "progress" and "in increasing the material well-being" of the peoples among whom they lived:²² "There is in this

an impulse to give, a collective activity to be organized and private initiatives to be determined, helped and encouraged".

ENDNOTES

1 The 80 unedited letters of the de Foucauld-Massignon correspondence have all been published in a work by J.F. Six, *L'Aventure de l'amour de Dieu*, which refers to their association (Editions du Seuil, 1993).

2 Hoggar.

3 The *Directory* was re-edited by Louis Massignon a year before his death (Ed. du Seuil, 1961).

4 Their new statutes, according to the 1983 Code of Canon Law, give them the title of a *private association of the faithful* (Christmas 1986).

5 Cf. J.F. Six G. *Riobe*, Ed. du Seuil 1982, pp. 207-2;6.

6 Dated 1 December 1995.

7 Letter to H. de Castries, 29 November 1901. Compare that to his friend Lacroix, 19 December 1901: "People are starting to call him the *khaouia* and to realize that the marabout is their father and the universal and international brother of all men". He explains to his Bishop, Guerin, on 19 January 1902: "The inhabitants are starting to call him the *khaouia* and to realize that in him not one but all the poor have a brother".

8 Letter to H. de Castries, 16 June 1902.

9 Four months before his death, on 1 August 1916, to Massignon: "I believe there are no Gospel words that have made a deeper impression on me and have changed my life more than 'As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me'.... To love Jesus in these little ones these sinners these poor, using all one's own spiritual resources for the conversion of souls all one's own material resources to relieve temporal poverty".

10 *Directory*, art. XXVIII. De Foucauld immediately adds: "Thus in order to work for the salvation of souls, we must go to them, mingle with them and live with them in close, familiar contact. We must do so for all the souls whose conversion God wants us especially to work for, particularly the infidels. We should go to them first of all".

11 Efrem, March 1898.

12 To S. Perret, 15 December 1904.

13 *Ibid.*

14 *Directory*, art. XVIII.

15 To Fr Caron, 3 April 1906.

16 To R. Bazin, 7 April 1916.

17 To H. de Castries, 29 May 1909.

18 Editions du Seuil, 1961.

19 Referring to V. Grossman's book, *Vie et destin*.

20 Thinking that Massignon was going to join him in the Sahara, Charles de Foucauld wrote to him: "You will know the people, do not speak to them of dogmas but make yourself beloved by them and you will make friends with them all".

21 To J. Hours, 3 May 1912.

22 Cf. his letter to Commander Duclos on 4 March 1916, in which he invites him to do everything possible in the Sahara to encourage "progress at three levels: intellectual, moral and material".

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