

REFLECTION ON CHARLES DE FOUCAULD AND THE SPIRITUALITY OF NAZARETH

From a retreat by Marc Hayet, Little Brother of Jesus

Charles de Foucauld: from separation to proximity

"I lost my heart to this Jesus of Nazareth, crucified 1900 years ago, and I am spending my life trying to imitate him as much as my weakness allows."¹

It is a beautiful definition of his life that Charles gives here. His story after his conversion was, in fact, before all else, the story of "a heart given and lost", the story of a real and strong friendship with Someone living and close, whose face fascinated him: Jesus of Nazareth. And it was within the dynamic of Jesus that he wanted to place himself: ("I seek to imitate him"). But this was a search that took time, going step by step, discovering little by little. At every step, Charles tries to interpret what "the Nazareth of Jesus" is like.

1- Soon after his conversion, while he was seeking how to give his life to God, he made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and, while visiting Nazareth, walking through the streets, he "glimpsed", as he said, what the life of Jesus was like: the life of a simple inhabitant of this town, one of the anonymous people whom Charles saw in the streets. This fascinated him: it was this life, with no relief, that the Son of God chose! And as he looked at them with his view as a Westerner, son of a rich family, their life seemed to him one of extreme poverty and "abjection" as he called it.

He had also in his mind the image that people had at that time of the life of the Holy Family of Nazareth: a life of perpetual silence, of constant prayer, almost one of having one's hands together all day long! In order to find these conditions of silence, recollection and poverty, in an intimacy with Jesus, he chose, logically, the monastic life.

"The Gospel showed me that 'the first commandment is to love God with all your heart' and that everything should be enclosed in love. Everyone knows that love's first effect is imitation; I had therefore to enter the Religious Order where I would find the most accurate imitation of Jesus. I did not feel done to imitate His life in public preaching: I had then to imitate the hidden life of the poor and humble worker of Nazareth. It seemed to me that no Order could offer a better way to that imitation than a Trappist monastery."²

He entered on the 16th of January 1890. 2-He left it seven years later (16/02/1897) and moved to the Poor Clares who housed him in a garden shed and gave him a few tasks to do. In a letter he explained,

"The good God has caused me to find here, as perfectly as possible, what I was seeking: poverty, solitude, abjection, very humble work, complete obscurity: the imitation, as perfect as it can be, of what the life of our Lord Jesus was in this same Nazareth... [...] The Trappist monastery caused me to rise up, created for me a life of study, an honoured life... that is why I left it and here I have embraced the humble and obscure existence of the divine worker of Nazareth."³

We see what his reading of "the Nazareth of Jesus" was at that moment: poverty, solitude, work, social obscurity (note the allusion to studies as social promotion). And he summarised it in this formula:

"the humble and obscure existence of the divine worker of Nazareth".

In fact he has discovered that there is a difference in nature between the poverty of a monk and the poverty of a poor, a poverty of means and social status. And he felt that it was the latter that brought

him close to Jesus of Nazareth. It is interesting to know that among the steps towards this awareness, there were some rare occasions of encounter with the concrete living conditions of a poor family:

"About eight days ago, I was sent to pray a little beside a poor, native Catholic who had died in the neighbouring hamlet: what a difference between that house and the places we live in! I long for Nazareth...."4

In the same way, he suffered from seeing that their monastery was protected, while in that area the first massacres of Armenian Christians had taken place.5

Living next to the Poor Clares at Nazareth, without any kind of "religious statute", considering himself as a poor worker, he thought he had found the solution: he had, at the same time, intimacy with Jesus and the social obscurity of the poor.

3-After three and a half years at Nazareth, he agreed to be ordained priest (something that until then had always seemed to him to be contrary to the social humility of Nazareth), and a new change resulted from it – he went to Algeria:

"My recent retreats for the diaconate and the priesthood have shown me that this life of Nazareth, my vocation should be led not in the Holy Land, so greatly loved, but among the sickest souls, the most lost sheep, the most abandoned people: this divine banquet, of which I have become a minister, needs to be presented not to my brothers, to relatives, to rich neighbours, but to the most lame, the most blind, the poorest, to the most abandoned people who most lack priests.."6

It was still the life of Nazareth, but he understood that in order to be with Jesus in that life, one has to go where Jesus went, to the most abandoned people: no longer was it to be separation and isolation as in the Holy Land, but living "among" the most abandoned people. It was a very important step! 4-But that raised a new question for him: how was he to reconcile presence to people (who did not delay in swarming into his house) with the recollection of the life of prayer (in order to remain close to the Friend Jesus)? On a trip he made into the great south Sahara region, he looked for a place to go and live among the Tuaregs. One day he found a place that might suit him, at the foot of a cliff near a path people walked along. So should he move high up in order to maintain recollection in isolation, or down below in order to have contact with people in the hurly burly of life? He wrote down his hesitations and reflections, and he placed into the mouth of Jesus what seemed to him to be the line to follow:

"As far as recollection is concerned, it is love that should recollect you in me interiorly, and not distance from my children: See me in them; and like me at Nazareth, live near them, lost in God. In these rocks where I have brought you myself despite yourself, you have the imitation of my homes at Bethlehem and Nazareth, the imitation of the whole of my life of Nazareth..."7

This is a new reading of "the Nazareth of Jesus" which allows him to resolve the tension between presence and recollection. Through love and by love, Jesus could be both totally present to God and totally present to people. It is love that keeps us recollected in God: if one truly loves, one can give oneself to others totally and without fear: one does not leave God by giving oneself to people. And we receive this magnificent and simple definition of Nazareth: 5- One of the best-known texts about Nazareth by Charles de Foucauld was written a year later, when he had moved into Tamanrasset:

"Jesus has established you forever in the life of Nazareth: the lives of missions and solitude are only, for you as for him, exceptions: practice them each time that His will clearly indicates them; as soon as they are no longer indicated, return to the life of Nazareth. Desire the establishment of the Little Brothers and Little Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Follow the rule as one follows a directory without making it a strict duty for yourself, and only in what is not contrary to the life of Nazareth;

(either when you are on your own, or when with a few Brothers, until there is really a possibility of leading perfectly the life of a Little Brother or Little Sister in a Nazareth that has enclosure) take as an objective the life of Nazareth, in everything and for everything, in its simplicity and breadth [...]: for example, until the Little Brothers and Little Sisters are duly established, no habit – like Jesus at Nazareth; no enclosure – like Jesus at Nazareth; no habitation far from every inhabited place, but close to a village – like Jesus at Nazareth; no less than 8 hours of work a day (manual or other; manual as much as possible) – like Jesus at Nazareth; no large lands, no large habitation, no large expenses, and even no large almsgiving, but extreme poverty in everything – like Jesus at Nazareth... In a word, in everything: Jesus at Nazareth [...] your life of Nazareth can be led anywhere: lead it in the place that is most useful for your neighbour.”⁸

I find that this text gives a lot of clarification. This is still a new reading of “the Nazareth of Jesus”. But “Nazareth” serves to designate two very distinct forms of life: a monastic religious community (“a Nazareth that has enclosure”) and, while waiting for it to be possible, a life (“the life of Nazareth”) directly in reference to the life of Jesus at Nazareth (“like Jesus at Nazareth”). While the first will be marked by separation (“enclosure”), the second is wholly characterized by what will make possible a proximity to the ordinary life of people. To describe this proximity, Charles de Foucauld indicates a cluster of examples that complement one another and form a whole. It is remarkable, also, that these elements that Charles emphasizes and which he says are “like Jesus at Nazareth” are the exact opposite of the elements of the monastic life that he “wishes to establish”: no habit, no enclosure, no isolation, the working day, no lands or large buildings, limited expenses and even alms at a normal level (with even the curious remark that certain elements of the rule for the Little brothers and sisters of the Sacred Heart, a monastic project, might be contrary to the life of Nazareth!...). “Take as an objective the life of Nazareth, in everything and for everything, in its simplicity and breadth [...] In a word, in everything: Jesus at Nazareth”.

Now that he knows how to keep his heart in God while being with people, and now that he is adopting a lifestyle similar to that of ordinary people, Nazareth is no longer a closed model; on the contrary, the meditation ends with openness to various realizations:

“Your life of Nazareth can be led anywhere: lead it in the place that is most useful for your neighbor”.

This last element clearly shows what is at stake: through our proximity, if we are united to God, the good news of the God who is close is proclaimed to the poor and this is his true good. 6- Charles spent the final years of his life making himself close to the Tuaregs, and this was the path of a friendship that needed to be built up patiently. He learned, little by little, the reciprocity of a true relationship (in particular, when he was cared for by them at a time when he was seriously ill), he worked to understand their culture, and he learned to appreciate them:

“I have spent the whole of 1912 here, in this hamlet of Tamanrasset. The Tuaregs have been very consoling company for me here, I cannot express how good they have been for me, and how I have found upright souls among them: one or two of them are true friends, something that is rare and very precious everywhere...”⁹

I cannot end this little excursion on the reading of Nazareth that Charles de Foucauld made without quoting a text that touches me deeply, written a few months before his death. Charles was looking for a priest to take on the steps that needed to be taken in France to create an association of the faithful, on which he had been working for several years. He wrote:

“I believe that I am less capable than almost all other priests of taking the steps that need to be taken having only learned to pray in solitude, keep silent, live with books and at the most to chat in a familiar way, person to person, with the poor...”¹⁰

This text touches me because it related to my experience and, as a Little Brother of Jesus, I wanted to say: see what being with Jesus leads to: it is an apprenticeship of prayer, of listening and of familiar conversation with the poor – three things that need to be learned. And the third of these, in what Charles says here, appears as the one he has learned best... From that apprenticeship, little by little, is born an openness of heart, an ability to be with the other where he is, to understand him from within, and to appreciate him. Charles has entered into the real life of Nazareth, united deep relation with God and deep relation with the people around him.

But isn't that the same path that Jesus of Nazareth took? That brings us back to "the Galilee. (John 7:52)"

The Pharisees say to Nicodemus, who defends Jesus.

For the religious groups, the circles of power, the doctors and the educated, Jesus is a man from below and from the margin. Certainly they do not have a better opinion of him than of those who follow him:

"This rabble knows nothing about the law, they are damned! (John 7:49)"

– The TOB translates it as "This mass... "). He is exposed without special protection, a simple pawn on the political chessboard in the eyes of the notables

("You do not seem to have grasp the situation at all; you fail to see that it is to your advantage that one man should die for the people than that the whole nation should perish!" John 11:50),

He takes on, right to the end, the situation as a man from the ordinary people and this leads him to death. The Gospel clearly indicates that here there is a revelation of the face of God and of his way of doing things:

"Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father who would promptly send more than twelve legions of angels to my defense? But then how would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say this is the way it must be?" (Matthew 26:53ff; cf. John 11:51f).

So it is then very moving to think that everything that Jesus said to us, about God, about people, about relations between God and people, was thought out and felt by someone from this great "mass", this ordinary crowd, scorned and suspected by the experts and the great. His words are the words of a "little one", of someone who has integrated into his personality the scorn that others have for his own people. I find that we do not marvel at this enough! It should make us read his words, about the merciful Father or the Samaritan for instance, with different eyes... A mysterious attitude of God who takes on, not humanity in general, but this precise humanity, doubtless because he judged it better able to express correctly who God is and what God wants!