

Charles de Foucauld in 1904-1905

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Introduction

Before retiring to Peterborough, I worked for about ten years in Rome. I belonged to a Fraternity of priests which used to meet monthly at the HQ of the Little Sisters of Jesus, just by the Cistercian Abbey of Tre Fontane, on the site of the beheading of St Paul. One member of our Fraternity was a priest who worked in the Vatican, Maurice Bouvier. Maurice was chosen for an awesome privilege and responsibility. He was to prepare the papers for the beatification of Bro. Charles – he was what was called the Promoter of the Cause, the man who had to prove to the Holy Father the sanctity of the candidate. This meant a minute study of everything Charles ever wrote, especially his letters. The final dossier amounted to an enormous book, I suppose the most detailed book ever compiled about the man who, if not our founder, is certainly our major inspiration. Before I left Rome I was lucky enough to be given a copy of this book, and today I would like to share with you just a chapter from it. In this talk I have also drawn upon the book by Fergus Fleming called “The Sword and the Cross”.

Talk given in Walsingham for the October 2010 Lay community weekend

In 1904, Charles de Foucauld makes the first steps to leave his hermitage at Beni Abbes.



In front of the hermitage at Beni Abbes, Morocco

You will remember that shortly after his ordination to the priesthood, Charles decided to install himself in the Sahara Desert. His motivation was simple. It was to seek out the poorest and most abandoned people, and serve them. “*I wish to proclaim the Gospel with my life*” he said; so, not by preaching or administering the sacraments, like conventional missionaries, but by his very way of being. He wanted to be Christ in the midst of people who did not know Him. The original plan was to set up house in Morocco; Charles already knew Morocco, because before his conversion he had embarked on a journey of exploration there, in order to compile an accurate map of areas where no westerner had ever penetrated. He had succeeded handsomely, but had needed to go in disguise. And now, in the early 1900’s, it was simply impossible for a Frenchman to live in the outback of Morocco – he would have been dead within days. This was partly because Britain, now recovering from the Boer War, was setting herself up as the defender of the Moroccans against French interference, and the Moroccans were becoming increasingly anti-French. It was all a great sadness, because Charles had been deeply impressed by the simple Islamic faith he had encountered among the Moroccans, and he felt a great affinity with them. But it was not to be. So instead, under the protective wing of the French Army, he settled in Algeria, not far from the Moroccan border, at an oasis called Beni Abbes.

The French Army



It is important for us to realise the important role played by the Army in the life of Charles. As a youngster he had gone to a military college, had graduated as an officer, and had fought in North Africa. His character before his conversion was a rebellious one, and at one stage he was cashiered; but he rejoined later, and eventually left the Army very honourably, with many enduring friendships.

He was converted in 1886, and went to try his vocation as a Cistercian monk, but he still remembered those formative years in uniform. North Africa filled his imagination, and much of his knowledge of North Africa was the military knowledge of a colonialist; he was a child of his age, and felt that the only hope of conversion for the Arabs lay, under God, with the French.

So when his vocation became clear to him - to live the Gospel among the most abandoned peoples of the earth - it was naturally of North Africa that he thought. In order for any Frenchman to plant himself outside the big cities like Algiers, military approval was required. And because of his army contacts and reputation, Charles was perhaps the only Frenchman who could have done what he did. He was the only civilian who would not be viewed as an obstacle and a nuisance. As time passed, he became a much appreciated resource for the army. He became a sort of mascot for them, but not in the sense of an object of derision. Even the officers and men who did not share his religious belief respected his unselfishness and his devotion to duty. They saw him as "one of themselves". The Government in Paris was deeply anti-Catholic and anti-clerical. But thousands of kilometres from Paris, on the front line of the colonial wars, many of the troops appreciated deeply the presence of an unofficial chaplain, and particularly of a man at once as tough and as caring as Charles de Foucauld. So he spent quite a lot of time with both the officers and the enlisted men; there were times when he was at hand precisely when he was needed, to give the sacraments to soldiers dying in battle. And he was more of an expert in the ways of the desert and its inhabitants than any of the military. He was really unique, and this is why at every stage the army was there to help him.

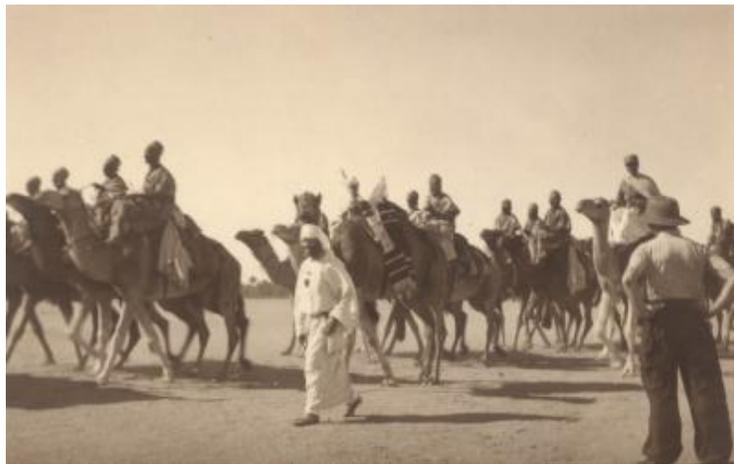
General Lyautey



Here's an interesting episode. General Lyautey, a flamboyant and powerful officer, decided to visit Charles at Beni Abbas. He arrived with an entourage of junior officers. They pulled Charles away from his chapel and his prayers, laid on a highly alcoholic meal, found an old gramophone, and started to play some sexy records. Lyautey was watching de Foucauld, and wondering how long the priest would put up with this boozy military party before walking out. To his astonishment Charles didn't walk out at all: he even joined in the laughter, stayed up most of the night, and increased the respect which the military had for him: he was still a man's man. The next day, at 7 a.m., the General took his staff to Mass at Charles' chapel. This is what he said.

"A hovel, that hermitage! His chapel, a miserable corridor on columns covered with rushes. A board for the altar; for decoration, a piece of calico with a picture of Christ; tin candlesticks; a flattened sardine tin with two bottles, that once held mouthwash, for cruets and tray! Our feet on the sand. Well, I've never heard Mass said as Father de Foucauld said it. It was one of the greatest impressions of my life."

Hoggar



But he was plagued by an increasing conviction that he was needed elsewhere. Deep down in the south of Algeria, in an area called the Hoggar, there was a network of tribes called the Touareg. They had their own language. They were extremely violent and savage; they conducted lethal raids on each other's villages, and practised slavery. But they were not such entrenched Muslims as the Arabs at Beni Abbas. There was more hope, in Charles' eyes, of converting them. And they were certainly among the poorest and most abandoned of all God's children. Charles was

egged on by an officer who was his personal friend, Colonel Laperrine. Years ago, they had been junior officers together. Laperrine was close by, so his advice was more cogent than anyone else's. There was also the fact that the French were engaged, at this time (having won what they saw as the necessary battles) in a peace mission, attempting to befriend the native tribes. Not unlike the efforts of the present-day troops in Afghanistan: winning over the locals. The generals were doing this with a political aim, but Charles' intentions were exclusively spiritual.

Now remember, Charles was a monk, and always wanted to do the will of God, and this was in his eyes to be found in the commands of his superiors. So he wrote to the Bishop in charge of the Sahara, Guérin, and to his own spiritual director in Paris, Huvelin. Can I go? Or should I stay where I am? But the post was slow, and Laperrine was always there at his elbow. Military convoys would be leaving for the south, he said, on 6 September and 15 October, and Charles could take his pick. In the event both convoys left without him, because the war blazed up close by, and Charles had to look after the wounded and bless the graves of the dead troops. But this was only a temporary delay. On 13 January 1904 with the blessing of the bishop, he set off on his first visit to the Touaregs.



Travelling

A Captain in the Regiment stationed at Beni-Abbes sets the scene for us.

“Fr. De Foucauld left on foot, driving in front of him a couple of donkeys which carried his modest baggage. (Laperrine was to say later “His packing is a miracle of neatness. He would make a sailor jealous.”) I had him accompanied for 75 kilometres, as far as Guerzim. There he joined up with the military convoy which was heading south. I made sure that there would be a horse available, if he wanted to use it, but afterwards I discovered that he did not do so. From there on he travelled with a charming cavalry officer, in whose tent he said Mass each morning.”

Charles himself, in his diary, explains why he undertook the journey. *“A convoy is leaving this morning for the Touareg region. I can join this convoy, and maybe no other priest will have the chance for a long time, for years perhaps, so I consider it my duty to go.”* What he tried to accomplish when he got there, he explained in a letter to a friend the following June: *“To get into conversation, to distribute medicines and alms, to show hospitality, to insist that we are all brothers in God and that we hope one day to go to the same heaven, to pray for the Touaregs with all my heart. That’s my life.”* Charles was a year away from his home at Beni Abbes. He returned in January 1905, but in May he was off again: the Touaregs had captured his heart.

Talking to Touaregs



At the same time, he missed bitterly the silence and the regularity of the monastic life he had developed for himself. *“My vocation is solitude, stability and silence.”* But there was a more insistent vocation, to carry the presence and the knowledge of Jesus to a people so far away from the Church and from European civilisation. *“The main element of my vocation, and of the Little Brothers (he spoke of them as though they already existed) is to imitate Jesus in his life at Nazareth, on the way of the Cross, and in his death.”*

Priorities



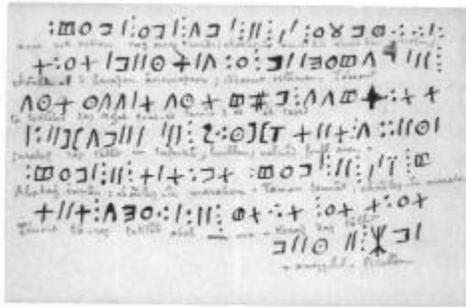
Thus he established his priorities. Captain Dinaux, who afterwards became a general, in an article written later describes Charles on the journey.

“He walked at a lively pace, bent forward, leading a camel by the reins, while his catechumen, Paul, led the other. His face was emaciated. His beard was bushy, and he used to trim it himself, with great strokes of the scissors. His face was lit up by the deep expression in his eyes, which were ardent and penetrating, and the great toothless smile which betrayed at all times the affectionate sympathy and goodwill he had for everyone. Humility, gentleness, spirituality, all these were expressed in his nervous body, which was controlled by his will, and a desire for spirit to triumph over matter. You could not help loving and respecting him. He wore a white gandoura, with a leather belt round his waist, and a rosary with big black beads. On his breast he had sewn the red heart with the cross above it... his bare feet were cracked, but he had stitched together some camel-skin shoes for himself, which he held on by a cord between the toes.”

What is remarkable is, of course, that while all the others in the convoy were on horseback or camel-back, Charles walked. Sometimes it was a stage of forty kilometres, dictated by the pace of the camels. Sometimes they did a forced march to cross a particular part of the desert, travelling by night as well as by day. From 5 a.m. the sun was incredibly hot, with a temperature in the shade between 40 and 50 degrees: each of them drank 8 or ten litres of water each day. He was unbelievably tough. When they reached the place where they were to camp, and the soldiers collapsed on to their sleeping bags, Charles went all round the camp making sure that the officers and men were all right, doling out medicines and little glasses of altar wine, and paying particular attention to the native soldiers. He would go back to his own tent then, and start his language studies, studies which he was to maintain until his death 11 years later. **He was determined to be a brother to the Touareg**, and how could you be a brother without being able to talk? And indeed Charles was notorious for striking up conversations with Africans of all descriptions, throughout this

interminable journey, and however tired he was. Writing to his cousin, he talks about “*breaking the ice*”, and gaining people’s confidence and friendship. “*With all my power,*” he says in a letter to his spiritual director in Paris, “*I try to show these poor lost brothers that our religion is all charity, all fraternity, and that its symbol is a heart.*”

Touareg



But there was another motive for his studies, and that was to translate the four Gospels. Years before, during his four years in Nazareth, he had developed an incredible love for the Gospels. He wanted above all to share their secret with everyone he met. The project mushroomed even beyond this, and eventually Charles was to devote all his waking hours to composing a Touareg dictionary, a colossal undertaking.

His Chapel



In his diary for July 1904 Charles describes how, during a prolonged halt in Touareg country, he built a little chapel out of branches, with a cross on top of it. Inside, he pitched a tent; and at one end of the chapel, a simple altar with a tabernacle on it. For him, this was hugely significant. The Real Presence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament was key.

“Sacred Heart of Jesus, thank you for this, the first tabernacle in the lands of the Touareg ! May it be the first of many, and proclaim salvation to many souls ! Radiate out from this tabernacle on all those round about, people who surround you yet do not know you.”

The radiant power of the Blessed Sacrament was, for him, almost physical. The overall impression you get from what Charles wrote at this time, and what other people wrote about him, is his intensity. His love for Jesus and his thirst to bring Our Lord to the Touareg, burned like a fierce fire.



Future Missionaries



That intensity of love shows itself in the way he would plant himself in front of the Blessed Sacrament and pour out his heart - often on paper, in his characteristic clear spidery writing, in pencil or black or violet ink. The diary that he kept was kept out of obedience to the Bishop. But it gave Charles the chance to be almost obsessive in his exactness. On the journey we are describing today he jotted down instructions for future missionaries. How to make a water skin, when to pray, what to wear, what sort of camels to use ... not the very fast ones like the troops; not the very slow ones like the baggage trains. The best alms to distribute: dates for preference. If there is space in the missionary's luggage he should bring vegetables with him, chillies, tomatoes, carrots, cucumbers, beetroots, turnips, pumpkins, onions; date fig, apricot and peach saplings. For every projected month of his stay the missionary should carry 130 needles, 50 handkerchiefs and a pair of scissors, for trading purposes. Then the medicines. Zinc sulphate for eye conditions, mercury for syphilis, potassium iodide for rheumatism, quinine for fevers, bismuth for intestinal complaints. And so, on and on. He sounds like a military quartermaster. Charles de Foucauld was a very exact man, with a talent for planning and micro-management which perhaps he had learned in the army, or maybe inherited from his noble forebears. The tragedy is that his very intensity frightened people who did not know him. When he was laying the foundations for the Little Brothers of the Sacred Heart he went so far as to design their first monastery in all its detail, actually sketch it out, as well as write a Holy Rule for them. But there never were any Little Brothers of the Sacred Heart. In his intensity, Charles left people behind.

Mass at the Trappist Monastery on the occasion of the Beatification of Brother Charles Beatification



Charles de Foucauld was beatified three years ago. His cause took a long time. It started, I believe, in 1927. Many people undertook to advance it, but this was a very unorthodox and unaccustomed saint. Apart from anything else, he wrote so much, and when someone is going to be beatified or canonised, every word has to be analysed. Maurice Bouvier was really responsible for a labour of love in correlating so much material. But what shines through all that writing and all that activity, all those journeys and all those encounters with Touaregs, Arabs and Frenchmen, is the burning, intense love which occupied his soul. He was totally in love with Jesus, with a white heat of intensity. And he brought that same white heat of intensity to bear on everyone he met, caring about them more than they would ever know, and longing to be the humble means of their salvation.