

Bl. Charles de Foucauld: Heart of Christianity, Heart of Christ

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Pope John Paul II's death led to the postponement of Charles de Foucauld's Beatification from the Feast of Pentecost 2005, as the last Pontiff had planned, to Sunday, 13 November 2005.

It is a shame that Pope Wojtyla died before the Beatification because of his longstanding friendship with Charles de Foucauld. He had come to know the new Blessed partly through the Little Sisters of Jesus, as he relates in his book: *Rise, Let Us Be on Our Way*, when he was a young Archbishop of Krakow: "I was also on good terms with the Little Sisters of Charles de Foucauld and sometimes worked with them".¹

The fact that the Beatification of de Foucauld occurred in the early months of Benedict XVI's Pontificate was equally providential and significant, if one remembers that the spirituality of Bro. Charles of Jesus has been very popular with the theologian Josef Ratzinger since his youth. In fact, it would be enough as a proof to go and read Ratzinger's book, *The God of Jesus Christ*, published on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of his priestly ordination.

Jesus at the centre

Before going into this subject, it might be helpful to recall what Bro. Charles of Jesus himself wrote: "Let us look at the saints but not linger in contemplation of them; rather, let us contemplate with them the One they spent their lives contemplating; let us make the most of their example, but without spending too much time on them or taking any one saint as a complete model; and let us find in each one what seems to us to correspond the most closely with the words and example of Our Lord, our one true model, thereby making use of their lessons, not to imitate them but to imitate Jesus better".²

This approach seems to us to correspond fully with one of the topics insistently emphasized in the thought of Ratzinger the theologian; hence, it is the right one to guide us in our reflection on the life and virtues of Bl. Charles.

The thinking of Pope Benedict XVI will be easier to understand if we remember that in 1863, five years after the birth of Charles de Foucauld, Ernest Renan published a book on the life of Jesus: *Vie de Jésus*, the first and best known of the seven volumes that make up his work on the *Histoire des origines du Christianisme*.

An article on the author in the *Enciclopedie du Catholicisme* states: "In 1867, in the 13th edition of *Vie de Jésus*, Renan explains the principle that guided him: the rejection of miracles and the supernatural. The Gospels are 'legendary biographies', creations of popular sentiment that transfigure outstanding characters. In spite of this, a certain sympathy can be detected in the book: 'Galilee is an idyllic place; Jesus, a man beyond compare . . . Christianity is the loftiest expression of the Divinity'".³

This is how the then Cardinal Ratzinger emphasized the future Blessed's contribution to the debate on the historical content of the Gospels that heavily marked the second half of the 19th century:

"It was Charles de Foucauld who, in seeking the 'lowest place', found Nazareth. During a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, Nazareth was the place that made the deepest impression on him. He did not feel called 'to follow Jesus in his public life. It was Nazareth that struck him the most deeply'".⁴

"He wanted to follow a silent, poor and hard-working Jesus. He wanted to live Jesus' words in a literal way: 'When you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place' (Lk 14:10). He knew that Jesus himself had explained these words by living them first, he knew that even before dying on the Cross, naked and without possessions, Jesus had chosen the lowliest place in Nazareth".⁵

It is very interesting, especially after Charles de Foucauld's Beatification, to follow what Cardinal Ratzinger continued to expound concerning his discovery of the Blessed: "Charles de Foucauld, walking in the traces left by the 'mysteries of the life of Jesus', encountered Jesus the worker; he met the true 'Jesus of history'. In 1892, when Charles de Foucauld was working at the Monastery of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart in Akbés, a book by Martin Kähler published in Europe created a stir: *The so-called Jesus of history and the historical-biblical Christ*. This was one of the first important writings on Jesus in history . . .".

We can repeat following Cardinal Ratzinger, today Benedict XVI, that the aspect of Jesus which most attracted Charles de Foucauld and which he wanted to imitate was his dimension as "the carpenter, the son of Mary" (Mk 6:3), who in Nazareth lived the simple and ordinary life of his fellow countrymen. Bro. Charles was particularly struck by the humble estate which marked the Incarnation of the Son of God: "God, the infinite Being, the Almighty who became a man, the lowliest of men".⁶

He set for himself the following programme of life: "I must always seek the lowest of low places, to be as little as my Teacher, to keep in step with him as a faithful disciple, to live with my God who lived like this throughout his life and gave me this example since his birth . . .".⁷

However, do not think that in order to make his own the mystery of the hidden life of Jesus, it was enough for him to wander through the streets of the little town of Nazareth.

To reach this goal, Bl. Charles exhibited the same determination of which he had already shown he was capable when exploring Morocco, and was later to demonstrate in studying the Tuareg language and employing other means: for example, on 27 May 1887, he ordered *La Vie de Jésus* by Abbé Fouard from the publisher.

Several months later, he immersed himself in the writings of St Teresa of Avila to learn what she said of her experience of Jesus. He also tried to find out how St John Chrysostom spoke of the events and deeds of Jesus. It was for this same purpose that he read the words of St John of the Cross and the lives of the saints.

And above all, he sought to read the Gospels from different perspectives, including that of the virtues practised by Jesus, which he listed.

As we can see, the permanent contact that Charles longed to have with the One who was his "only Model", his Beloved Good whose "little brother" he desired to be, was brought about in a privileged way through his love for the Gospel and for the Eucharist.

He spent much time reading and meditating upon the Gospel, where he rediscovered the words and example of Jesus whom he desired to imitate and follow out of love, and he advised his friends to make time in their lives for moments of intimacy with the Lord.

Bro. Charles of Jesus also spent many hours before the Most Holy Sacrament, where his faith told him that Jesus is present with all his saving power for the world. Thus, he was faithful to the "two tables" where, according to faith, Jesus continues to be present among his followers "to the end of the age".

The new element in Charles de Foucauld's teaching on the mystery of Nazareth was that the hidden life in Nazareth was not only a stage in Jesus' training for his mission as Saviour, however long it may have been, but was also salvation itself that was already beginning to work through him.

The best illustration of Bro. Charles' insight is his meditation on the Visitation of the Virgin to her cousin Elizabeth. Inspired by Bossuet's *Elévations sur les mystères*, he did not dwell on Mary's readiness to help her elderly cousin Elizabeth. In his eyes it was not so much a visit of practical charity to assist her cousin in the last months of her pregnancy and at the birth, although Mary goes to her and this is important.

But something else was far more important: "Mary set out to sanctify St John, to proclaim the Good News, to evangelize him and to sanctify him, not with words but by bringing Jesus to him in his home, in silence . . .".⁸

This point deserves further development: "John the Baptist was sanctified, and with him, the whole of Zechariah's family, not through words or an invitation to conversion that would in any case have been impossible, but simply through the presence of the Son of God within her. From before his birth, therefore, Jesus is Saviour with his presence alone. Continuing along the lines of Bossuet, Bro. Charles extends this form of sanctification to all souls.

"Just as Mary sanctified John by going to his home and bringing Jesus himself, the living Gospel, within her, a soul that is filled with Jesus can bring salvation. With regard to the Visitation, Bossuet notes that as soon as she is filled with the Holy Spirit she is full of love, and that this is what happens to every soul: it possesses love to the extent that it lives on Jesus".⁹

Universal brotherhood

Followers of Charles de Foucauld know well that the Visitation is one of the important pillars of his spirituality. They also know that Jesus of Nazareth was revealed to Bro. Charles as the Universal Brother whom we must imitate if we are to become, with him, a universal brother in miniature.

It would be good to examine more deeply the link that exists between the work of salvation accomplished through the Incarnation of Jesus of Nazareth and his universal brotherhood.

We can attempt to set about it like this: if the Son of God became the Saviour of humanity from the very first instant of his conception in Mary's womb, it is certain that his work of saving humanity begins at the very moment when, taking flesh, he became a member of the human race and shared the existential bonds of reciprocity that exist between human beings and make them one body.

For this reason, each person can establish a bond with the One who, by sharing in God's holiness, puts humanity, for which he feels solidarity, in touch with God, his Father.

Could one believe that every human being who agrees to behave as such with his peers enters into the circle of human relations and, whether he knows it or not, therefore enters into a relationship with the Saviour?

Such an affirmation, already evocative in itself, seems even more legitimate if one takes into account the teaching of the Second Vatican Council found in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church: "Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience — those too may achieve eternal salvation. Nor shall divine Providence deny the assistance necessary for salvation to those who, without any fault of theirs, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, and who, not without grace, strive to lead a good life".¹⁰

To tell the truth, such explicit affirmations are not found in de Foucauld's writings, but he undoubtedly contributed in his own way to the discovery of the unity of humanity. He did not want to invent theories; for him it sufficed to reflect on the content of faith that impelled him to imitate Jesus, and therefore to love the poor for love of him.

A meditation written in 1895 on chapter 25 of Matthew's Gospel enables us to discover what led de Foucauld to consider every human being as a "member of Jesus": "Jesus is the Head of the Church and the Church is the Body of Jesus. All the faithful are the members of Jesus, and even infidels as living people are, in a certain way, although distantly yet really, the members of Jesus because they belong to the Church as her distant parts. All people, therefore, in one way or the other, are Jesus' members . . .".¹¹

Today, no one would hesitate in saying that what Charles de Foucauld reasserted in his writings and with the example of his life anticipated the teaching of the Second Vatican Council on the mission of salvation entrusted to the Church.

Cross and mission

Without diminishing Charles de Foucauld's insistence on Jesus' mission as Saviour that he carried out from the moment he came into the world, it is impossible to underestimate the meaning he also attributes to Jesus' passion and death on the Cross.

It was already evident in the letter he wrote on 20 April 1906 to Fr Huvelin, when he presented to him his project of publishing a brief text on Our Lord Jesus (a text that was subsequently to be called *La modèle unique*) and used an image as title.¹² It was a picture of the Holy Face, of the Holy Shroud of Turin, and was captioned: "Ecce Sponsus . . . Sic Deus dilexit" (Here is the Bridegroom . . . this is how God showed his love for us).

The Face of Jesus, who descended from the Cross and was about to be buried, is held up to us as proof of God's love. The passion and death of Jesus are presented to us as the epiphany of divine love. Charles de Foucauld calls it the "supreme declaration of love". In his theology, the sufferings of the Bridegroom are not so much with a view to humanity's redemption as rather a sublime testimony of love.

We can apply to ourselves a passage of his meditation on that sentence from Mark's Gospel: "He presented to them Jesus scourged", on which Bro. Charles wrote: "Let us love God because he loved us first. The passion and Calvary are a supreme declaration of love . . . Love is the most powerful means of making oneself loved . . . and also because suffering for the one we love is the most invincible proof that we love . . . Since he declares his love for us in this way, let us in turn declare to him our own love, as he did; especially as it is impossible to love him and want to be crowned with roses, when he was crowned with thorns".¹³

Salvation for Charles de Foucauld is given to us by contact through faith with Jesus the Saviour in a perpetual act of filial obedience, newness of life, rebirth, in the tracks of a just truth. He has brought about the world's redemption from the moment of the Incarnation: Jesus, still in Mary's womb, sanctifies the Baptist and saves him.

What Bl. Charles found interesting in the mystery of the Cross was the possibility of discovering in it a testimony or sign, and of understanding that Jesus' passion is martyrdom in the powerful sense of the word martyrdom, which means being an absolute witness.

If Jesus' passion means martyrdom, we can understand why it was that Charles de Foucauld, desiring to imitate his Beloved Good Brother and Lord Jesus, wanted to die a martyr. The sentence he wrote on 6 June 1897 that was to prove a detailed prophecy is well known and often quoted: "Only think that you must die, stripped of everything, laid out on the ground, naked, unrecognizable, covered with blood and wounds, killed in a violent and painful way . . . and desire it to be today".¹⁴

In examining the deep roots of the inner life of Charles de Foucauld, we realize that there are probably few forms of spirituality like his that are suited to the needs of the contemporary world.

His spirituality brings us to the heart of Christianity and makes it possible to rediscover in modern souls evangelical poverty, not its longed for sentimentalism but its radical strength, which can convey to people so bewildered by consumerism the true sense of God.

Today, Bro. Charles can guide us to behaving like true brothers and sisters of all people without distinction, not through mere humanitarianism but thanks to his communion of love with the Heart of Christ.

Notes

1. Paulines Publications Africa, by arrangement with Arnoldo Mondadori Ed., S.P.A., Milan, p. 122.
2. *Relatio et vota, super virtutibus*, Congregation for the Causes of Saints, 2000, p. 54.
3. S. Fraisse, article on Renan, vol. II, Letouzey et Ané, Paris, 1990, col. 880-881.

4. M. Carrouge, *Charles de Foucauld, explorateur mystique*, Cerf 1958, p. 93.
5. J. Ratzinger, *Le Dieu de Jésus Christ*, translated from German by Yves et Marie Noëlle de Torcy, Communio-Fayard, 1977, pp. 78-79.
6. *Retour à Nazareth*, November 1897, in *La dernière place*, new edition, Nouvelle Cité, 2002, p. 60.
7. In *La dernière place*, *op. cit.* p. 63.
8. *Considérations sur les fêtes de l'année*, p. 472.
9. *Comment on St Matthew*, pp. 131-132; cf. *Le Christ de Charles de Foucauld*, pp. 135-136, *op. cit.*
10. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 16.
11. *Extraits des saints Évangiles sur l'imitation de Notre Seigneur, l'amour du prochain . . .*, published in *Petit Frère de Jésus*, Nouvelle Cité, p. 92.
12. *Père de Foucauld-Abbé Huvelin, Correspondence inédite*, Desclée et Cie, Tournai, 1957, p. 256-257.
13. *La Bonté de Dieu*, p. 194.
14. In *Voyageurs dans la nuit*; Nouvelle Cité, 1979, p. 35.

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