

The Universal Brother: Charles de Foucauld

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Two months before the death of Pope John Paul II on April 2, 2005, the Vatican Office in Rome announced the date for the Beatification of Charles de Foucauld . This first step towards becoming a canonized saint was scheduled for Pentecost Sunday, May 15, 2005, eighty-nine years after Brother Charles of Jesus was killed in 1916 during WWII by a group of rebels in the southern Algerian desert. He had lived in the midst of the Berber tribe of Muslims known as the Touareg people for 10 years, drawn to serve those who he perceived as the poorest of the poor, “the most abandoned ones”. When the pope died the Beatification was postponed and will be held in the Fall of 2005.

Charles de Foucauld was born into an aristocratic family in Strasbourg, France, close to the border of Germany, on September 15, 1858. He and his younger sister lost both parents within a few months of each other when Charles was 6 years old and the children were raised by their maternal grandfather. Charles would struggle with the effects of these early losses on his personality for many years. He was willful, probably spoiled by his grandfather, and had bouts of anger and a deep sense of sadness as a child. As an adolescent he lost his faith in the process of searching philosophical texts for answers that would satisfy his hunger for some absolute key to life. He was fiercely independent and resistant to all authority, even his grandfather. Following family tradition he entered the military academy. Later when his grandfather also died he threw himself into hosting parties for his friends, providing the best wines, cigars and meals, and squandering his inheritance, unconsciously seeking to dull his feelings of pain and emptiness.

At this time France was at the height of its colonial ambitions in North Africa. Charles' impetuous nature as a young man caused him to be sent back to France from a military assignment in Algeria because he insisted on bringing a young woman to Algeria with him. Finally he decided to re-enlist when his comrades were sent on a mission to Tunisia but he was sent to Algeria instead. This time his experience of the desert aroused his curiosity and drive for adventure. He was 24 years old in 1882 when he left the army and meticulously prepared himself for an exploration of Morocco, a country with closed borders to foreigners, especially Europeans.

Disguised as an orthodox Jew, he engaged a Jewish Rabbi to be his guide. It was during these many months of exploring the desert that he experienced Islam for the first time. He was struck by the devotion of these people who stopped what they were doing five times a day to turn in the direction of Mecca and pray on their knees in a gesture of adoration and belief in the One Transcendent God. Moreover, the hospitality and even safe passage that he experienced by Jews and Muslims alike had a lasting effect on him. The detailed maps that he drew and the descriptions of Morocco that had never before been explored nor published in Europe made him famous as a geographer. Charles was clearly an explorer but he didn't yet know of exactly what.

One of his letters to his cousin, Marie, reveals a great deal about his character. No matter what hardships he encountered during 11 months in the desert he was determined to bring his project to completion. Clearly he had not only learned self-discipline but also how to focus his natural inclination to pay keen attention to detail. By the time his exploration of Morocco was published he had returned to Paris and begun the search for God that changed his life forever.

When Charles lost his mother as a child, his first cousin, Marie, became like a surrogate mother to him. She was eight years older than Charles and her letters

throughout his adolescent years and early army experience were a very important support for him. It was Marie who had attended his First Communion and given him his first book on spirituality. His cousin, whose married name was Marie de Bondy, and her family were devout Roman Catholics who welcomed him warmly on his return from Morocco without speaking of religion at all. Their generosity of spirit and goodness caused him to wonder if there was something to their experience of God after all. He began to spend time in the churches of Paris asking for a sign that God actually exists. Marie had spoken of Abbé Huvelin, a compassionate priest, spiritual guide and popular preacher at the church of St. Augustine. Charles decided to ask for some religious instruction. When he approached Abbé Huvelin, he was simply told to kneel and make his confession and then invited to the altar to receive Communion.

Some years later in a letter written in 1889 to his cousin Marie he makes it clear that she was like a guardian angel to him. He describes how badly he felt when his aunt, her mother, wrote to convince him to come home to them after one of his disastrous military school escapades. He writes to Marie:

“but you, you wrote a letter that made me feel good, that moved me at an age when I was not easily affected and contributed more than anything else to making me return to my aunt. On my return from Morocco I wasn't doing any better than some years before, and that first time in Algiers when I felt so badly; you were so kind at Tuquet I came back to seeing and respecting the goodness that I had forgotten for ten years. ...And since then what good have I received that I did not receive from you? Who brought me back to the Good God? Who gave me to the Abbé? You gave me my first religious book. It was you who led me to the Trappists, who introduced me to the Sacred Heart of Our Lord through the image on your table, through the name of Mary Magdalene, my patroness... I cannot speak of all the goodness I receive each day, who could speak of all of it...?”

Later, when he had made a retreat in the Holy Land and experienced being in Nazareth for the first time, he would write in a letter written on August 14, 1901 to his friend, Henry de Castries, “As soon as I believed that there was a God I understood that I could do nothing else but live for Him. My religious vocation came at the same time as my faith. God is so great! There is such a difference between God and all that is not Him...In the beginning faith has so many obstacles to overcome. For someone like me who had so many doubts....I didn’t believe all in one day I did not feel that I was to imitate His public life of preaching; I ought instead to imitate the hidden life of the poor, humble workman of Nazareth”.

These two experiences, of his family living the gospel by example rather than preaching it, and his feeling of being drawn to imitate the hidden life of Jesus in Nazareth, became the foundations for his vocation and his message. Charles was called to be an explorer, an explorer of mystical experience.

His confessor, Abbé Huvelin, made him wait for three years and then he entered a monastery. From the moment that Charles entered the Trappist Monastery of Our Lady of the Snows in 1890 he struggled to fulfill his vocation to the form of religious life to which he felt God was calling him. He wanted to offer his life entirely to God, to pray constantly for hours at a time, to lose himself in this Jesus who he loved so passionately. And he wanted to go back to the desert to be a hermit, to live poorly and in solitude, to conquer his own feelings of laziness, half-heartedness and cowardice. He fought tenaciously and willfully with both his superiors, who wanted him to study for the priesthood, and his spiritual director, Abbé Huvelin, until he was finally released just before making his final vows. In 1897 Abbé Huvelin suggested he return to Nazareth and offer to serve the sisters at the Monastery of St. Clare in exchange for living in a small hut beside the convent.

For the next four years Charles lived his hidden life in Nazareth doing menial tasks for the sisters and praying his prayer of Adoration all night in the

chapel before the Blessed Sacrament. He began his lifetime habit of meticulously organizing each hour of the day, praying, writing in his diary, eating the minimal possible, working, reading the Gospel, and back to praying. Then he returned to France in order to be ordained as a priest. He wrote to his friend Henry de Castries:

“I have just been ordained a priest and I’m taking the necessary steps to continue ‘the hidden life’ of Jesus of Nazareth in the Sahara, not in order to preach, but in order to live the humble work of Jesus in solitude and poverty all the while trying to do good for souls, not through words but through prayer, offering the Holy Sacrifice, penance, and love...”

The transformation from a well to do aristocratic family, a spoiled teen-ager who lost his faith and a sergeant in the French colonial army, to the ‘marabout’, the holy man, offering his life and love to an obscure Muslim tribe in the Algerian desert was for Charles a testimony to the saving power of a loving and all merciful God. He realized that living with the people, serving their daily needs, supplying food, medicine and authentic concern and care was evangelizing by living the gospel message, witnessing to the goodness of a loving God by being good to others. Just as his cousin and her family had been for him. He spent hours translating the Gospel into the language of the Touareg people, wrote a French/Touareg dictionary, translated local poetry into French and befriended his Muslim neighbors. He welcomed everyone as if they were Jesus, including French soldiers and visitors, non-believers and those of other faiths. He became known as the “Universal Brother” that he wished to become.

Brother Charles always hoped that others would join him. He built hermitages and wrote and re-wrote an elaborate Rule, a Directory, for his Little Brothers and Sisters of the Sacred Heart. Abbé Huvelin discouraged him, realizing that only Charles himself could live such an austere lifestyle. Then Brother Charles had a new vision, of Christians from all walks of life, consecrated, married or

single, living his hidden life of Nazareth in the context of their daily lives loosely bound together as an Association of prayer. He modified his Rule, and in 1909 went to France to get it approved by a local Bishop.

While in Paris Brother Charles met with a young man who had sent him a thesis of an archeological study that he had done in Iraq. Louis Massignon was 26 years old and had experienced a conversion of heart in the midst of the Muslim world. Like Charles, Massignon had also lost his faith as a young person. While he was in Baghdad he had begun to research the life and religious philosophy of an obscure 10th century Sufi Saint by the name of al-Hallaj for his thesis at the Sorbonne, and was overcome by an experience that he described as “God breaking into his life” and calling him back to his childhood Christian roots. He was convinced that this experience was in part due to the intercession of the 10th century Muslim al-Hallaj as well as others who he knew were praying for him.

Brother Charles hoped that Massignon would become a priest and join him in Tamanrasset. He invited the young man to come with him to pray in the Basilica of the Sacre Coeur overlooking Paris. Massignon wrote, “the whole night, slow, somber, bare, without consolation, in this huge and glacial tomb of Sacred Heart”. For Brother Charles this night of shared prayer at the Basilica of the Sacred Heart with Louis Massignon was the beginning of his prayer Association. They were the first two members.

The two men began a correspondence that spiritually nourished and influenced Louis Massignon for the rest of his life. He was a gifted researcher and scholar and a linguist who easily spoke and published in ten languages. His own passion for God, the desert, and the Arab world caused him to be internally torn for several years between these two very compelling paths. Should he take up Father Foucauld’s invitation and become a priest or was he called by his talent for research, and growing reputation as a scholar, to an academic career? At the age of

30 he chose academia, marriage and a family. He remained the first member of Father Foucauld's prayer Association.

At the beginning of World War I in 1914 Brother Charles made the decision to stay for the duration in Tamanrasset to provide shelter if needed for the local population. He planned to return to France after the War to promote his prayer Union. On December 1, 1916 he was taken hostage by a band of raiders and thrown to his knees, his hands tied behind his back. A young 15 year old held a gun and kept guard while his fort was ransacked. The youngster panicked when he saw two soldiers approaching on their way to visit the priest and pulled the trigger. Brother Charles was assassinated at point-blank range.

Charles de Foucauld died alone. No one had come to join him or share his vision of Little Sisters and Brothers of the Sacred Heart, and his Prayer Association, made up of a small group of intimate friends, had only 48 members. All of them were sure that his legacy had died with him, except Louis Massignon. By now Massignon, who was now 33, was becoming a well-known Professor and scholar of the sociology of Islam but he was also a passionate mystical thinker. His friendship, admiration and love for Foucauld, who he thought of as an 'older brother', led him to work to accomplish his friend's vision. He only received the news of Foucauld's death a month later while serving as a sub-lieutenant in the French military.

On his return from the Front he retrieved a copy of Foucauld's Directory and the promise of help from Abbé Laurain. He visited the White Fathers, whose mission in the Sahara oversaw Foucauld's ministry there, and Charles' friend Henry de Castries. He needed a biographer and approached the well-known writer, René Bazin. In 1921 the biography by Bazin that made Foucauld famous, *Charles de Foucauld, explorateur du Maroc, érmitte au Sahara*, was published in Paris. Massignon published Foucauld's *La Vie Spirituelle*, the Spiritual Life, in 1922.

The first edition of the Directory was published in Cairo in 1918, financed by Massignon himself, and he finally convinced the ecclesial authorities to provide an official *imprimatur* for an edition published in Paris by Éditions du Seuil in 1928. He continued encouraging members of the Prayer Association as well.

It is perhaps only in retrospect that we can identify the Spirit at work in our life decisions. Louis Massignon's reputation as a scholar and his social connections, along with his own tenacity so much like Foucauld himself, allowed him to keep his mentor's spiritual vision alive. Had he followed Brother Charles' mystical path into the Sahara the story may have come out very differently. As it was, in 1926 a small group of seminarians, influenced by Bazin's biography, began following Foucauld's Rule as the Little Brothers of the Sacred Heart and soon became the first Little Brothers of Jesus. In 1933, with Rene Voillaume as their superior, they founded a fraternity in Southern Oran.

Everyone who wished to follow Foucauld, both consecrated and secular, turned to Massignon for encouragement and guidance. Massignon saw the Directory, that Foucauld had written and revised many times since 1908, as the sacred container, the essence of Foucauld's spiritual legacy. It was meant as a guide for all who would live their own "Sahara" in prayer and through caring for others, especially the poorest and most marginalized, non-Christians, and those he called "the most abandoned ones".

The most revolutionary story is that of Suzanne Garde, a young French woman born in Tunisia in 1896, because hers was the very first foundation to follow Foucauld's vision of a lay apostolate. Her vocation was a response to Foucauld's description in a letter written in 1906 to Abbé Caron, "... that there be young women or widows desirous of completely belonging to Jesus without entering a convent nor wearing a religious habit and ready to devote their lives forever for Jesus in extreme poverty as lay nurses in these lost countries". She

wanted to live in poverty in the midst of a Muslim population, like Foucauld, and opened a boarding school for young Muslim girls in Tlemcen, Oran in 1924. Massignon supported her foundation, encouraged her adherence to the articles in the Directory, and her request for authorization from the Bishop to remain a secular group, unheard of at that time. Her work was misunderstood by both the civil and ecclesial authorities until after World War II. Suzanne Garde died in 1954.

Mme. Macoir-Capart became a widow in 1928 and wanted to start a women's religious congregation. She became Little Sister Magdeleine, foundress of the Little Sisters of Jesus in 1936. She and one other Sister followed Brother Charles' example and left for Algeria in the Sahara. They wanted to continue his work among the Muslims there. By 1967 there were more than one thousand Little Sisters of Jesus belonging to 48 different nationalities. It is in their community, on the hill above the Trappist monastery called Tre Fontane outside of Rome, that the belongings of Brother Charles are being housed. Along with many other precious items in the small chapel is his famous drawing of Jesus rising above the altar, with his arms outstretched bearing his sacred heart on his tunic.

After World War II there was a surge of interest in establishing religious congregations following Foucauld's vision and in 1950 the Monsignor of Provençères established the Secular Fraternity of Charles de Foucauld. It became a lay movement that included a number of Fraternities of Priests and numerous groups of lay persons. Today there are eighteen distinct groups of secular fraternities numbering six thousand members world-wide who generally meet locally on a regular basis in small groups.

The only Association actually begun by Father Foucauld was the Union Sodalité called Jesus Caritas that began with Louis Massignon on that all-night prayer vigil at the Basilica of the Sacre Coeur in Paris in 1909. When Massignon

died in 1962 it continued under Father Jean François Six as a loosely bound association including individual members from monasteries and other religious orders and lay people from all walks of life who adopted the Foucauld spirit. They receive a newsletter twice a year and many participate in the annual reunion of the Secular Fraternities as well. The Union Sodalité has one thousand members world-wide.

In 1955 Louis Massignon attended a gathering at Beni-Abbes in Algeria of the leaders of all the foundations that had been established to live out Foucauld's message. He spoke of his first meeting with Foucauld and their night of adoration in Paris, as the foundation of a spiritual movement that springs from the eremitical spirit of Foucauld himself. Massignon understood that the members of the Sodalité were bound to one another through Foucauld's own experience of offering his life for others in solitude and living the evangelical counsels in the midst of their daily life encounters, that he described so meticulously. Massignon guided the original members of the Union Sodalité to stay focused on Foucauld's Directory. They were already bound to one another through his spirit in the communion of saints. Massignon's presence in Beni-Abbes inspired and provided a witness to the very source of the spiritual existence of the Fraternities.

Religious communities and lay fraternities began to be established in the spirit of Foucauld everywhere. They serve others in the context of their lives, in large part hidden, quietly running soup kitchens, clinics, orphanages, and addressing the societal failures of discrimination, poverty, and abuse wherever they are. Many serve throughout the Middle East, Asia and in the Americas and all live the ecumenical vision of Foucauld. He had wanted companions, and to be the founder of a religious community and even the founder of a lay prayer association, but most of all he wanted to be a "Universal Brother" in imitation of his beloved Jesus.

While he was in Nazareth in 1897 Brother Charles wrote this meditation addressed to God:

"You tell me that I will be happy with the blessed happiness of the last day... that as miserable as I am, I am like a palm tree planted beside living waters, the living waters of the Divine Will, Love, and Grace...and that in due season I will bear fruit.

You deign to console me: you tell me that I shall bear fruit when the time is right. And when will this time be? For each one, this time will be at the Judgement. You promise that as long as I keep trying and stay on the battlefield, even as poor as I may seem in my own eyes, I will have borne fruit on that last day.

And you add: you will be a beautiful tree with leaves that are eternally green: and all your works will prosper and bear fruit for all eternity. My God how good you are." (Who can resist God? p.109)

Brother Charles died alone in the Sahara. No one came to join him and there were only 48 members of his prayer Association most all of whom expected that it would not survive. What would he say to the thousands who are now members of his spiritual family?
