

## **The Story of Louis Massignon and Brother Charles**

**Published in Saint Charles de Foucauld North American Lay Fraternities  
Newsletter, Volume 5, issue 3, June 2025**

by Dorothy C. Buck

The witness of these two extraordinary men of the late 19th and early 20th century to the power of Divine Love to transform hearts and minds through an encounter with the person of Jesus is the beginning of understanding their unique relationship. Both had questioned the validity of religion in their youth and both rediscovered Christianity in the midst of the Muslim world: Foucauld during his exploration of Morocco in 1883 and the eventual publication in 1888 of his detailed descriptions and maps that made him famous as a geographer; Massignon on his return via Iraq from his own archeological exploration of Mesopotamia for the French government in 1908, then a part of the Ottoman Empire. He had written a letter of thanks to the hermit priest and included a copy of his extensive study of the 16th century geographer of Morocco, Leo Africanus, having used Foucauld's description of Morocco as his primary source for his thesis for his Sorbonne University diploma that was published in 1906 in Algeria. Foucauld's response ended with a blessing: "I offer to God for you my poor and unworthy prayers, begging him to bless you, to bless your work and your whole life." Only after reflection on his extraordinary experience of the Divine in 1908 that led to his own lifelong spiritual journey did Massignon attribute his conversion in part to the prayers of the hermit priest. After his conversion experience, Massignon wrote a second time to Brother Charles.

These were two intense personalities who shared an experience of the Divine that turned their lives around and set them both on a passionate spiritual journey. Foucauld wrote back that he was coming to Paris in February, and they were able to meet in person. In February, 1909 Brother Charles was 51 years old. Massignon was 26. Foucauld came to Paris in order to get his vision approved by a local Bishop: "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." Previously Foucauld had hoped that he could attract others to join him in his mission with the Touareg people in Algeria. He had struggled with writing a Rule that he called a *Directoire* (Directory) for his vision of a religious community, the Little Brothers of the Sacred Heart. Foucauld had become the *marabout* (a holy man) for the Touareg people, serving the needs of this tribal people as best he could, providing counsel sometimes into the night. He translated the Berber poetry into French and the Scriptures into the Berber language. His spiritual director, Abbé Huvelin, suggested that his Rule for a

religious community presented a lifestyle that was too severe for anyone else to adopt besides Brother Charles himself and eventually Foucauld revised his vision.

Massignon met the hermit priest in Paris, and Foucauld invited him to join him for his customary all night prayer vigil at the Sacre Coeur Basilica overlooking the city of Paris. Although Brother Charles hoped that Massignon would have a vocation to the priesthood and be the one he could mentor to eventually join him in the Sahara and replace him, Massignon's intellectual gifts for languages and scholarly research caused him to hesitate and eventually to choose marriage and family as well as a long career as a French Diplomat and Professor of the Sociology of Islam at the College de France in Paris. After their meeting the two men corresponded regularly until Foucauld's death in 1916. Massignon became the first member of Brother Charles' prayer Association that he called the *Union Sodalité*. This group of 48 intimate friends met in Paris on a regular basis until December 1, 1916 in the midst of World War I when Foucauld's fort was ransacked by a militia. They left a 15-year-old as a guard, holding a rifle pointed at the priest who was on his knees, hands bound behind him. In the distance French soldiers on the way to visit the holy man were approaching on horseback, and as a result the youngster panicked and shot Brother Charles. The marabout died instantly.

Over time Brother Charles had come to believe that his ministry and love for the Muslim Berber people may not cause any conversions or bring other Christians to join him but rather plant the seeds by being a witness for them to the Love of the Christ for all human beings. The last letter that Brother Charles wrote to Louis Massignon was found in his *borg* (fort), waiting to be picked up for mailing. In their many letters Massignon referred to Foucauld as an "older brother" and often wrote for spiritual advice including whether he should leave his family and offer to go to the front during World War I. It was while he was in the trenches that he received a letter from his wife telling him of the marabout's death. His response was to rejoice that his "older brother" Charles had now returned to God as a martyr for his faith, for Massignon had always believed that Brother Charles' imitation of "the poor man of Nazareth" was a Saint.

When news of Brother Charles' death reached them, the members of the Union Sodalité were convinced that the priest's legacy was lost forever. But Louis Massignon took it upon himself to gather Brother Charles' writings including the *Directoire*. He contacted the well-known writer, René Bazin, and asked him to write the first biography of Brother Charles. In 1921, the biography by Bazin that made Foucauld famous, "**Charles de Foucauld, explorateur du Maroc, érmite au Sahara**" (Charles de Foucauld, Explorer of Morocco, Hermit of the Sahara), was published in Paris. Massignon privately published and distributed 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, until

he finally convinced the ecclesial authorities to provide an official imprimatur for an edition published in Paris by Éditions du Seuil in 1928. 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.... 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.

In 1926, inspired by René Bazin's biography, a small group of seminarians began to follow Foucauld's original Rule. They formed the Little Brothers of Jesus as a religious community in Southern Oran with René Voillaume as their superior in 1933. After World War II, interest in Foucauld's spiritual vision blossomed, attracting others to form religious communities as well as lay movements. Louis Massignon remained a source of support for Little Sister Magdaleine who established the Little Sisters of Jesus in 1936. He remained friends with the original members until his own return to God in 1962. I was fortunate to be able to meet Little Sister Annie, who wrote the story of the foundation of the Little Sisters Community, and three of the original Little Sisters on our visit with Father Lenny Tighe in May, 2005. 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 on a bed sheet of Jesus rising above the altar, with his arms outstretched and bearing his sacred heart on his tunic.

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, married and single, 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.

In 1947 Louis Massignon wrote the Statutes for the *Badaliya*, an Arabic word meaning substitution or to take the place of another. This prayer movement was established in Cairo, Egypt in 1934 with the Egyptian Melkite (Greek Catholic), Mary Kahil. The two had made a vow in an ancient Franciscan Church in Damietta, Egypt to dedicate their lives and their prayers to the well-being of the Muslim community as Islam was fast becoming the dominant political and religious power in Egypt at the time. Massignon was convinced that the "Three

Abrahamic faith traditions" ( Massignon's coined word) were intrinsically connected to one another as "siblings," all claiming the Patriarch Abraham as their founding father. Damietta was not only the birthplace of Mary Kahil but also the place of the famous meeting of St. Francis with the Muslim Sultan during the fifth crusade, said to be the very first authentic interfaith dialogue and respectful exchange by Christians and Muslims. The Badaliya, made up of many groups and individuals from all three Abrahamic faith traditions, joined either in spirit or in person monthly from 1947 - 1962. Massignon sent a convocation letter each month to members all over the world while meeting with a group in Paris.

Substitutionary prayer, offering our suffering for the well-being of others, formed the foundation for Massignon's own lifetime spiritual journey. It is as intense a form of prayer as was Foucauld's own spiritual practice. The Statutes and Massignon's letters describe the gatherings as including the silent prayer of Adoration as well as readings shared primarily from the writings of Charles de Foucauld as well as others. Before his death he questioned if the Badaliya and the Union Sodalité should be joined to one another or remain separate prayer movements. Père Six, the facilitator for the Union Sodalité, preferred to remain only the spiritual guide for members of the Union. During World War II Mary Kahil had refurbished an Anglican Church and rededicated it as Greek Catholic, naming it Our Lady of Peace. After the war when Massignon could continue his annual visits to Cairo, they established a center called, *Dar es-Salaam* (the House of Peace), sponsoring over 130 International Conferences, lectures and talks dedicated to Christian, Muslim and Arab history, culture, philosophy, lives of the saints and many other educational topics. Dar es Salaam became a sanctuary for Islamic/Christian dialogue through an organization formed by Father Ayrout and some Islamic professors in 1941 called *Ikhwan es-Safa*, the Sincere Brothers. After Massignon's return to God, Mary Kahil continued the Badaliya gatherings with both Christians and Muslims in the spirit of the Sincere Brothers Interfaith encounters until she died in 1979.

In 2002 the Badaliya USA was established in the spirit of Massignon and Brother Charles de Foucauld, whose intense experiences of the power of Divine Love to transform the heart, cause rejoicing in the wonder of the vast diversity of religious faith traditions and cultures in our world and continues to provide a sanctuary for many. The spirit of Brother Charles and Louis Massignon continues to inspire and encourage religious communities, lay fraternities and individual spiritual seekers in the midst of the complexity of modern life to persevere in hope for the end to violence as a solution to conflict and for peace with justice everywhere.

## References

- Buck, Dorothy C. (2015, July). The Universal Brother: Charles de Foucauld. *National Catholic Reporter*.
- Buck, Dorothy C. (2002) *Dialogues with Saints and Mystics: In the Spirit of Louis Massignon*. KNP, New York/London.

For original statutes and letters by Louis Massignon see: *Louis Massignon: Pioneer in Interfaith Dialogue, The Badaliya Prayer Movement* 2016. Blue Dome Press NJ.

For posted published articles and all past letters to the Badaliya USA and Peace Islands See [www.dcbuck.com](http://www.dcbuck.com)

*Editor's Note:* Dorothy C. Buck has a Ph.D. in Religions and Literature and is a licensed psycho-dynamic therapist and pastoral counselor. She is the facilitator for the international monthly gatherings of a re-visioning of the Interfaith Badaliya prayer movement established in Cairo, Egypt in 1934 by Louis Massignon and Mary Kahil. Please refer to [www.dcbuck.com](http://www.dcbuck.com) for all Badaliya convocation letter postings, articles and books.