



From A Bishop's Journal (620)

Blessed Charles de Foucauld (1858-1916)

Charles de Foucauld is not an unknown name in our milieu: Fernando Thériault, son of Mr. Donat and Mrs. Anne-Marie Thériault of Edmundston, is a member of the Little Brothers of Jesus, a religious institution inspired by the writings of the newly beatified Foucauld. Besides, several priests in the diocese are members of the priestly fraternity Jesus Caritas, whose spirituality is derived from Charles de Foucauld. On November 13, this year, Father Roger Dionne, V.G., for many years the diocesan coordinator of Jesus Caritas, attended in Rome the great event of Foucauld's beatification. Some of the biographical information below is taken from the website of the French Conference of Catholic Bishops and the excellent analysis made by Father Jean-François Six, S.J.

Who Is Charles de Foucauld?

Born in Strasbourg, France, September 15, 1858, Charles de Foucauld was orphaned at six. His maternal grandfather cared for him and his sister and looked after their education. After the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, Charles moved to Nancy. Although he made his first communion in 1872, he said that he lost the faith in 1874 and became an agnostic. In 1876 he attended military school and started living a disorderly life. He courageously took part in military operations and went as far as Algeria. In 1882 he undertook an exploration of Morocco. However, he was hounded by a religious quest. In Paris he went to Father Henri Huvelin for religious instruction, but was told to go to confession and receive communion, rather. For Charles this was his moment of conversion, and the grace gradually transformed him. Resolved never to live again for none other than for the God of Jesus Christ who came to meet him, Charles made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. There he discovered what was the humble life of Jesus, the poor carpenter of Nazareth, and was drawn by the desire to love him and imitate him with all his might, Charles decided to become a Trappist monk. He entered the monastery in 1890. Six years later he asked to leave the monastery and was authorised to follow his own vocation. He travelled to Nazareth and asked permission to lodge in the tool shed of the Poor Clare Sisters, to whom he became the handyman. He lived there as a hermit, a life filled with prayer, poverty, and the search for the will of God. After three years, his desire to imitate Jesus in his universal charity led him to contemplate ordination to the priesthood. On June 9, 1901, he was ordained a priest for the diocese of Viviers, France: it is as a "diocesan priest" that he was beatified. So as to radiate universal charity and bring the eucharistic presence to the poor of non-evangelised regions, Father Charles considered going to Morocco where he had already been, and to this end he established himself in the farther reaches of the Algerian-Moroccan border, at

Beni-Abbès. In 1905 he established himself in the Hoggar of the Touaregs. He learned their language so as to be close to them and to save their culture; he worked at promoting their human, intellectual and moral progress by helping them discover the secret of his religious life. At Tamanrasset as at Beni-Abbès, his hoped-for companions did not come; he remained alone, but he desired that in France his missionary responsibility be shared, and for this he imagined a “fraternity” composed of people of good will joined in a wide network of service to these developing countries that have not been touched by the Gospel message. Father Charles was killed with a shotgun in an ambush in front of his hermitage, on December 1, 1916.

Francis, Thérèse, Charles

In the world and in the Church God raises up prophets of His love, witnesses whose entire lives proclaim the infinite richness of God’s love. Like Saint Francis of Assisi, Charles de Foucauld strove to live in absolute poverty; he contemplated Jesus in his total poverty, his great humility as a carpenter in Nazareth. Charles found no other comparison for his project than Francis of Assisi and his poor brothers who travelled the roads preaching as Jesus had done in Galilee and Judea. Charles wanted to found a community which would reproduce the hidden life of our Lord, as Francis of Assisi had applied himself to reproduce the Lord’s public life. From 1893 to 1896, Charles developed this intuition, this grand desire of his: “we shall never save any money from one week to the next... What shall work be like? It is the work done in the region by the poorest class, a job easy to do so that all, the educated and the ignorant, the strong and the weak, can do it. We shall welcome the literate and illiterate alike, the young and the old, the priests and the lay people. There shall be no distinction between priests and lay brothers. All are equal, and all are called brothers. Where do we live? Especially in the outskirts, where the poor reside.”

Silence and Solitude

Like Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, Charles de Foucauld wanted his whole life to witness to God’s love. He does use profound theological arguments, he knows that many of his contemporaries are reticent about theological demonstrations that are too overpowering, where we want to prove too much. Thérèse and Charles prefer more discrete signs to categorical statements, they prefer indirect statements, as was the case with good Pope John XXIII. With his conversion Charles no longer wants to possess everything, he seeks to dispossess himself, to strip himself. The hidden life of Jesus would be his main reference point. Charles seeks to present the Gospel in a discrete manner. He did not develop an intellectual plan, but through his life’s example he proposed an evangelical spirituality. The Eucharist, presence of Jesus’ death and hidden reality of the risen Christ, lies at the heart of Charles de Foucauld’s spirituality. To all who desire to be saints he suggests that they “burry” themselves like the grain of wheat, that they live at the heart of human reality so as to transform them into Christ’s own life. Nazareth shows that the word of God is passed on in the usual course of day-to-day living: like the Eucharist, bread shared daily, from day to day.

Prayer of Self-Surrender

I invite to pray with Blessed Charles de Foucauld the prayer he bequeathed us: it is an expression of his radical faith and of his desire to love. “Father, I surrender myself to you, do with me what you please. Whatever you do with me, I thank you. I am ready for everything, I accept everything as long as your will is done in me, and in all your creatures. I desire nothing else, my God. I commit my soul

into your hands, it is yours, my God, I give it to you with all the love of my heart because I love you and because it is a need of love to give myself, to surrender myself to you totally, in complete confidence, because you are my Father.”

+ François Thibodeau *gm*

+ François Thibodeau, C.J.M.
Bishop of Edmundston

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