



## Universal Brother: Charles de Foucauld and Islam

by Marianne Bonzelet

### 1. INTRODUCTION

*"I want all those who live in this country, Christians, Muslims, Jews and pagans, to think of me as their brother, the universal brother. "To be a universal brother became a great desire of Charles de Foucauld. But who is able to be a brother to everyone? None of us would have to search very far before finding someone whom we would not wish to accept as a brother or a sister. On the other hand, "Universality" has become an actual reality for many of us, certainly in Europe:*

1. Modern methods of communication allow us speedy contact with the rest of the world and events as they unfold;
2. There is no supermarket which doesn't have fruit and vegetables from all countries of the world.
3. Have a meal or catch a snack at Italian, Greek, Turkish, Chinese, Mexican. Japanese restaurants < almost everywhere the choice is abundant.

Globalization means that our world resembles more and more a village. We take more notice of what we do, even whilst on our own, and the effect it will have on society in general. Particular situations are all directly linked to our own attitudes.

The idea of "brother" continues to be a stumbling block. In a limited fashion we often think of ourselves as brothers and sisters. When the circle is widened, however, the idea of brother and sister doesn't mean a great deal. Politicians don't speak of brothers and sisters in other countries. The other is generally a stranger, a foreigner, perhaps even an enemy.

In the religious scheme of things, we can see some progress in understanding other religions as well as a much greater tolerance with regard to them. Islam remains a bone of contention because fundamentalists hit the newspaper headlines and cause fear. Paradoxically, we cannot be a brother or a sister except by seriously taking on board conditions which make up our daily life.

### 2. CHARLES DE FOUCAULD'S EVOLUTION TOWARDS BECOMING A 'UNIVERSAL BROTHER

Charles de Foucauld's desire to be the universal brother, especially for the marginalized, didn't fall from heaven < it came about by a progressive evolution.

During a pilgrimage to the Holy Land he discovered Nazareth: 'God walked these paths. God became a worker at Nazareth; God became a brother'. Charles de Foucauld valued the need to retire from the world in order to live with "his well loved Brother and Master Jesus." When he entered the Trappists,



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he considered the greatest sacrifice of his life to be leaving behind those whom he held dear. "The greatest sacrifice for me is so great that all the rest disappear and are no longer of any importance. To leave forever my family, whom I love above all else, leave my friends, even if they are not numerous, but to whom my heart is truly attached."

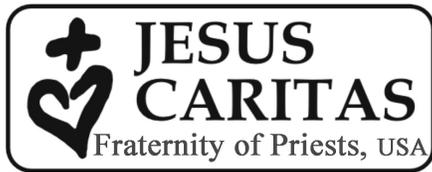
Up to now we still haven't found any trace of the 'universal brother'. In April 1890, Charles de Foucauld wrote: "All are children of God, who loves them totally It is impossible to love God, or want God, without loving mankind or wanting mankind." His love for all mankind seems to be dictated by reason. Certain events arose during the course of his Trappist life which brought him to the conclusion that closeness to Jesus can also be lived in a different manner than by retreating from the world. A visit to neighbors made him discover that these people were poorer than the monks. During times of persecutions, he realized that the walls of a monastery gave security which Christian neighbors of the monastery did not have. Charles expressed a feeling of too much richness, of too much security. A slow maturing made him want to account to God, to bring peace and liberation to the world, to become "brother" by in the end becoming close to those who were marginalized and who were excluded by others. This discovery caused Charles to make contact with the world, so as to finally be close to his beloved Master Jesus.

From then on his project was to found a religious community by which this universal love could be expressed. The style of life would be a witness, a simplicity in which the most poor would be able to be at ease.

Non-Christian countries, Muslim countries, would be where this community's development would have priority. And again, the manner of praying (liturgy language) would be so simple that the poor would be able to accept it. About 70 years before the second Vatican Council, Charles de Foucauld said: "Our liturgy closes the door of our monasteries to Arabs, Turks, Armenians and others who are good Catholics but do not know one word of our languages and offices in Latin." He knew that in the East, the national languages were used for the liturgy and he did not understand why in the areas where the languages were Arabic, Turkish and Armenian, it was necessary to introduce a liturgy in Latin. Those who came to the chapel at Akbes could understand nothing of that language.

In January 1897, not long after having taken his vows, Charles de Foucauld was authorized to leave the Trappist Order to go and live at Nazareth. That same day animated by a meditation by Teresa of Avila on the "Our Father", he also wrote a meditation on the same prayer. His attitude of universality is easily noted: "My God, you are good! Because you want to be my Father and that of all mankind, how much more must I have the sentiments of a tender brother for all, no matter who they are, no matter how miserable they are." He asks for daily bread for all. "But above all, I must say that in asking for this double bread of grace and of the Eucharist, I do not ask it for myself only, but for us, that is to say for all mankind." And again for forgiveness. "I ask for forgiveness, as for grace, not only for myself but for all mankind."

In North Africa, he became the brother of all those he met. Close to the Moroccan border he wanted to construct a hermitage where each of the monks who lived there could share, "right to the last mouthful



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of bread, with each poor person, every guest, every unknown who arrived, and welcome each human being as a well loved brother."

Charles' monastery would be a hermitage and at the same time a centre of hospitality. Already in November 1901, not long after his arrival in Beni Abbes, he wrote to his friend Henry de Castries: "The little building is called la Khaoua, "the fraternity" because Khaouia Carlo is the universal brother. Pray to God that I will truly be a universal brother to all in this country" To his bishop he wrote, "The local people speak of me as a brother to the poor, but not only the poor, of all human beings." The first quote is taken from a letter to his cousin, Marie de Bondy and dates from the same time (January 1902).

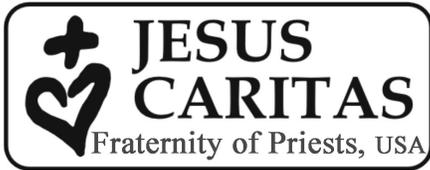
Charles de Foucauld's brotherly life here, as later at Tamanrasset, is very diverse. He distributes food, heals the sick, buys slaves to free them, meet legionnaires, learns the Toureg language, familiarizes himself with the ways and customs, welcomes visitors, etc. What the Touregs thought of this marabout Christian is expressed in the declaration of a woman whose five children were saved during the 1907 famine, thanks to Charles de Foucauld. "What a shame to think that such a good man will go to hell after his death because he is not Muslim." This woman and many of her compatriots prayed to Allah each day that he would make the marabout a Muslim.

Charles was truly their brother because he shared their life. Even more so when, sick and dying, he allowed himself to be cared for by some Toureg women who saved him with goat's milk. He came to understand that friendship and love between brothers and sisters needs to be reciprocal.

From 1908, he wanted to spread the apostolate of the fraternity to lay people who would agree, by their example, their goodness and their spirit of friendship, to interest non-believers in their faith. The directory for this community of lay people was drawn up for Easter 1908. Lay people had a special place in the missionary work which he envisaged. Priests, lay people and religious - all Christian - should be apostles. For Charles that meant to say "See each human being as a brother to love " and "Read and re-read without ceasing the Gospel in order to always have the spirit of the works the words and the thoughts of Jesus."

### **3. CHARLES DE FOUCAULD BEFORE ISLAM.**

Side by side with his evolution towards the "universal brother", there existed within Charles a progressive connection with Islam. From the time of his military service in Algeria, Charles was fascinated by the Muslim world. He was very impressed to see soldiers stop their fighting to pray. At the end of the combat, he prepared a voyage of exploration to Morocco. Disguised as a Jewish Rabbi (Rabbi Joseph Aleman, born in Russia, expelled during the persecution), he traveled in the company of a Jew. From then on he would be protected by Moroccans on many occasions. They saved his life even knowing who he was. Without them, he would no doubt have been assassinated in 1884 and not in 1916. Charles experienced the greatness of the Islamic world which respects the enemy, the person, those who are of no nation, no religion, world where true hospitality is practiced. Even more, he



discovered people for whom God represented "all". In contact with the believing Muslims, he began to understand that God alone counts and that the life of a human being is very simple, that it consists of giving oneself completely to the Almighty. The witness of the Muslim people burned in him like a strong fire. He seriously thought of becoming a Muslim.

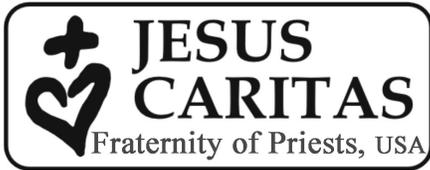
A few days after his ordination he wrote to his cousin "yes, you are right, Islam affected me profoundly. Seeing the faith of these people living continually in the presence of God, caused me to realize something greater and truer than worldly occupation. I studied Islam, then the Bible. In the end the grace of God saw that my childhood faith was affirmed and fortified. When Charles decided, before his ordination, to leave for North Africa, he explained that he wanted to be among the most forsaken and among non-believers (Muslims and pagans) of Morocco and the adjacent countries. He elaborated on numerous projects for the conversion of Morocco. He doesn't seem to have a high opinion of the Muslims, most likely because he didn't know enough about Islam in spite of previous encounters. He asks his cousin to send him the book which she had written on Islam.

"Even more than helping me to know the Muslims whom I love with all my heart, it will help me to do good to them, which I desire ardently."

From the time he discovered that the Christian faith presented a richness for himself, he became convinced that the Christian religion was the true one. From then on, he is amazed to see that at Beni Adde and even more so at Tamanrasset, he interacts with the Touregs, even becoming like them. He was fraternally close to those of his area, he was appreciated as their guide, and as a companion in different situations. He wanted to know and love their lives, their values and the richness of their cultures. It was important for him in the end to be a witness of Jesus. Subsequently he became more and more a 'universal brother', brother to all. The Arabs and the Touregs called him "the Christian marabout". Normally, the words Christian and marabout exclude each other.

#### **4. RELATION WITH THE IMAGE OF GOD**

Charles de Foucauld's desire to become a 'universal brother corresponds to the image he had of God. He knew that the way in which we approach our neighbors mirrors our relationship to God. The love of our neighbor and the love of God are linked. The importance of what he saw was expressed in a letter addressed to Louis Massignon on August 1, 1916: *Think a great deal of others, pray a great deal for others. Devote yourself to the salvation of your neighbor by all the means in your power, by prayer, by goodness, be example, etc. It is the best way of proving to the divine spouse that you love him. 'All that you do to one of these little ones, you do unto me'... The material alms that we give to a poor person given to the creator of the universe. God wants so much for us to give this charity to our neighbor that he has made the second commandment "like the first" a true resemblance of the first, which is the love of God ... There is not, I believe, a word of the Gospel, which has had a more profound impression on me and transformed my life more than this: 'All that you do unto one of these little ones, it is to me that you do it.' If we believe that these words are those of the uncreated truth, those of the mouth which*



*said: This is my body, this is my blood'; with such force that we are carried to search for and to love Jesus in 'these little ones', these sinners, these poor, carrying all those material means towards relief of temporal misery.*

I would again like to mention some ways by which Charles was motivated to become 'a universal brother'. During the course of his constant meditations on the Gospel texts, he continually found a humble God who descended so low that all layers of humanity felt drawn to Him. Meditating on the shepherds close to the crib stamped this impression for him:

*Jesus himself chose his adorers! First he called the shepherds - simple, poor people. Poverty, lowliness, love of the poor, these are the signs calls the poor. This is the divine wisdom of the goodness of my God! If you first called the rich, the poor wouldn't have dared to approach you. Convinced of the need to stay at a distance because of their poverty, they would have let the rich come close to you, and they would have looked upon you from a distance. By letting the shepherds come first, you called all to come to you. By calling the poor first, you showed them they were important to you, preferred by you until the end of time. At the same time the rich were also called. On the one hand, they aren't usually timid, and the other, it is up to them to decide if they also would become poor, like shepherds.*

In Jesus he found a God who excluded no-one from his love. This God gave personal dignity to each person. There was no special formula. His imagination and creativity found the right word for each person and made everyone his brother and 11 sister. To live following Christ, it was necessary to internalize 11 His way of living and imitate His creative love in all fraternal relationships.

Charles de Foucauld loved the Eucharist and eucharistic adoration. This was not simply a way of establishing a relationship with Jesus but also with all those who were dear to His heart because his body and his blood were given for us all.

After Charles' death on the first of December, 1916, one of his neighbors wrote to his family: "He hasn't died for you only, but for all of us. May God grant him mercy and may we see him again in paradise!"

### **QUESTIONS TO ASK FOR A REVIEW OF LIFE:**

- What does it mean for me: to be or to become a brother or a sister of all humankind?
- What do I know of Islam?
- Are there possibilities of dialogue with Muslims in my area?
- Who are, for me, the marginalized, the has-beens, to whom can I offer my love?