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Chichester Diocesan Synod, December 2001

by Rt. Rev. John Hind, Anglican Bishop of Chichester, UK

85 years ago today a French priest named Charles de Foucauld was murdered in his desert hermitage by some of the tribesmen among whom he lived for many years as a solitary witness to Jesus Christ.

Otherwise known as Brother Charles of Jesus, he is in a figure from a different age, but with lasting lessons as the Church, not least in our own country and our own county, faces unprecedented challenges to our inherited ways of doing things if we are to be faithful to the mission and service to which our Lord summons us.

Please do not underestimate these challenges. It is of course always true that the church in any particular place is only one generation away from extinction, but if we are not careful that will stop being a truism and a clarion call to mission and will become the reality. Already there are millions of people in this so-called Christian country for whom the sacred name of Jesus is only a swear word, and God Almighty the same.

The Church of Jesus Christ cannot fail, but the Church in England can, and, unless God overrules us, it might. This is not scare-mongering.

One of the reasons I so value our area bishops so much is that they are in no doubt about the Lord's command to mission and have shown such imagination and energetic initiatives to make this a central feature of our life together as a local church. We all need to understand just how urgent the situation is. It is all too easy to mock the flaky sandwich-board men who proclaim that "the end is nigh". But it is. Jesus told us to, keep awake because we do not know the hour or the moment. This is one of the great themes of Advent, which begins tomorrow. The Lord is coming, and we must be ready both to welcome him and to be recognized by him, but we do not know when or how. So you see, I am not speaking only about some immediate and current problems facing us. but a permanent aspect of our human situation.

Anyway, back to Brother Charles. As a young man he lived a dissolute life and appeared totally to have abandoned the Christian religion. It was on a scientific expedition to Morocco that he observed the quiet, self-effacing but non-negotiable piety of a Muslim guide. This made him reconsider his own inheritance and led ultimately to his re- conversion to Jesus Christ.

He felt called to imitate Jesus as closely as possible, and thought to start with that that - must mean trying to reproduce the exact details of Jesus' life in his own. So after some - years as a monk in monasteries of increasing severity he got himself a job as an odd job man in Nazareth, working as a poor servant in a convent.

Eventually however he came to believe that living as Jesus had lived did not so much mean treading the same paths that Jesus had trodden, but rather living a hidden life among the poor and outcast. He went to Algeria and made his home among the Tuareg tribesmen of the Sahara. His aim was not to be an active outgoing missionary, but to witness in a hidden way, which was what he understood the method (and the message) of Jesus himself to have been. For him this meant being devoted to Jesus in the holy scriptures, in the blessed sacrament and in the poor. A central idea for Charles was that of brotherhood - in French of course *fraternite*, a word which since the Revolution had had almost entirely secular and godless echoes. For him however this was the very basis of our relations with Jesus, with each other in the church and with all people.

He was not a notable success in his lifetime, either in converting the Tuareg or in building the community of brothers for whom he longed. After his death however a huge spiritual family has grown up around his teaching.



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The sting in the tail is that after his death a cache of arms was found in his hermitage. Is it possible that this man of prayer who wanted to model his life exactly on that of Jesus was some kind of an agent for the French authorities?

In this strange and somewhat obsessive biography there are some examples of vital importance for us who want to follow Jesus in Sussex today.

1. God used a devout Muslim as a judgment on Charles' indifference. We must be alert to the lessons God is teaching us in the lives of those outside or on the margins of the Church.
2. Being a disciple of Jesus must involve us in wanting to be like Jesus. This might take different forms for different people and at different stages of our lives, but in itself this should be a central motivation for each one of us.
3. The means of grace, the holy Scriptures and the sacraments are not merely aids to a good human life, but are the gift and the presence of God who cannot be adequately spoken about in words and images from earthly experience. We must allow God to lead and change us through the means he has provided. Being steeped in the Bible and being regular and faithful in holy communion cannot be optional extras for any Christian.
4. Jesus is here with us and for us whether we are always aware of it or not. There is plenty of scope for energetic moral and missionary activity, but there is no point in any of that unless it arises from the hidden presence of Jesus. We may not be able to do everything we would like to be able to do, but we can and must make sure that wherever there are people in Sussex the church is there for them. This means no withdrawal from difficult places, and also careful attention to those areas where mission should be focused; I think very particularly of new housing estates and the opportunities many of them offer for work with young families and schools.
5. Jesus, though in the form of God, did not cling to equality with God, but humbled himself, taking the form of a servant. The spirit of fraternity - brother- and sisterhood - is fundamental to the nature of the Church. This should lead to a revolution in our relationships within the Church and also with those outside. Life Together is a vision arising from Jesus' declaration that he came that we might have life in its fullness; not that some might have more life than others! Jesus' own special affection for the poor and the outcast should be a key feature of any plans we make for pastoral and mission reorganization in the Diocese.
6. Even in the problem of the French arms has something to teach us! If Charles de Foucauld is a saint, he is an ambiguous saint. As are we all. We should never abandon our hope in the possibility of perfection - indeed we should strive for it - but we should not despair when we discover that we have clay feet.

Dear friends, we are likely to be living through some interesting times. May Advent lead us to a new state of readiness for whatever God has in store for us and whatever this world will throw at us. And may the grace which filled Charles de Foucauld fill us all too and engrave the words of the hymn in our hearts:

All for Jesus, all for Jesus
This our song shall ever be.