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The Childhood of Charles de Foucauld

by Franz-Georg KAST

Wissembourg-Weissenburg in Alsace, the homeland of Charles de Foucauld in his childhood.

When a brother, sister or family belonging to the spiritual family of Charles de Foucauld pays me a visit, then if they have some free time, I always propose that they visit the city of Wissembourg in Alsace, a stronghold on the French-German border, where they can discover some traces of Charles de Foucauld.

If you have never been to Wissembourg, it is good to know that it has a history of 1300 years and an admirable Benedictine Abbey (St Peter and St Paul). It is the most northerly situated city in Alsace, at the foot of the Vosges and on the border of the "Lauter", a little river coming from Palatinat.

Ten km to the north is Bergzabern, where the Carmelite saint Edith Stein found her faith in Christ (in the autumn of 1921) and where she was then also baptized (on 1, January 1922). To the south, only 65 km away, is Strasbourg, the city where Charles de Foucauld was born.

Elisabeth Beaudet de Morlet, Charles de Foucauld's mother, was born in 1830. She spent a part of her childhood in Wissembourg. Her mother, Catherine Elisabeth, her father's first wife and Charles' grandmother, is buried in the Wissembourg churchyard.

After his first wife died, Elisabeth's father married Marie-Anne Amelie de Latouche de Saverne, but he regularly returned to Wissembourg. Madame de Foucauld and her husband Count Francois Edouard de Foucauld de Pontbriand were therefore not in unknown territory when, at the beginning of 1859, they moved from Strasbourg to Wissembourg with little Charles.

Francois Edouard de Foucauld, a Forestry Inspector, had been transferred to Wissembourg. With his family, he moved into the Vogelsberger palace, which is situated at Quai Anselmann 65, near the Lauter river and facing the big cathedral tower.

That's where Charles grew up and that's where he had to fill the empty spot in the hearts of his parents and family that was left there by the death of his older brother.

Francois Edouard and Elisabeth de Foucauld had been very happy since their marriage on 15 May 1855. Their home was Place Broglie 3 in Strasbourg. Their happiness became complete when on 17 July 1857 their first child Charles was born. But the little boy died only days later, on 16 August. The Charles that we know was born 15 September 1858 in their house Place Broglie 3, and he became his older brother's replacement. He was baptized 17 September in the family house, as was the habit with noble families. The solemn rites for the baptism were



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delayed to 4 November, his name day, also the name day of his grandfathers. The ceremony took place in the church of St Peter the Younger.

Charles' little sister Marie was born 13 August 1861 in the house that the family had rented, number 65 in Wissembourg. She was anointed for baptism on 23 September in the St Peter and St Paul cathedral.

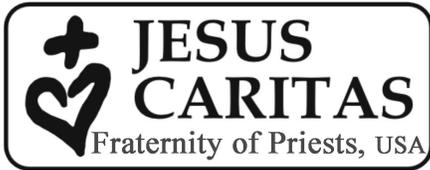
"A boy and a girl! A perfect combination! But soon their happiness would be gone..." (Marguerite Castilion du Perron) Father Edouard grew ill. Long periods with depression change his way of life and make him incapable of working. The family does all it can to support him, but the medical talent of Strasbourg brings no cure. He is taken to his family in Paris. Unfortunately, even in Paris, he cannot be healed. Finally, he is taken to the Passy hospital where Dr. Blanche takes care of him. Thanks to the Wissembourg parish priest dean Gerard Wackenheim, the mystery of his illness has probably been solved. According to documents that he found, Monsieur de Foucauld had a type of meningitis (transferred by a tick) that was incurable in those days.

Charles' father died on 9 August 1864 in Ivry near Paris, a victim of his profession as Forestry Inspector in Wissembourg. Gerard Wackenheim discovered that the first years in Wissembourg were happy years for our young and growing boy Charles.

Wackenheim has been in charge of the St Peter and Paul parish until 2000. The villages to the east and to the south of the city were also his responsibility. At the age of 67, he has now moved to Honduras where he currently functions as a parish vicar. He shares his life with the poor very much like Brother Charles did. When he was still parish priest in Wissembourg, he investigated the influence of the Wissembourg period on the life of Charles de Foucauld.

He makes us aware that the parents of Charles de Foucauld were wealthy. They had many friends and the children of these friends became Charles' companions in his games. The family led a rather secluded life; mother had a commitment in helping other mothers who were expecting birth. The young family was always happy when the grandparents came to visit them. They came by train from Strasbourg. The young family also often visited the grandparents in Strasbourg and other relatives in Saverne.

The father's illness destroyed this happiness. Everything changed instantaneously. Mother is obliged to gradually take over more and more of father's responsibilities. She must now worry about the family's economic situation. When the problems become overwhelming, she seeks refuge with Jesus' mother Mary. The refuge for the afflicted of the city and its neighbourhood was situated in the lateral nave on the right hand side of the cathedral. It is near the pilgrimage to Weiler, on the western border of the city and it is the place where people could come with their sorrows and find new strengths. Elisabeth often went there accompanied by little Charles and in that way she transmitted to him his first prayer experiences.



Our first part of childhood is influenced by our mother and father and by all the relations of our parents or part of the family. In his entire life, Charles had shown a great fidelity to his grandparents and much respect to all the people that he met. The child grew up amidst his family and it is there that the characteristics of his personality developed. They were the foundations that would later allow him to continue his journey to God and to others. In his letters, Charles often speaks about the people who gave him a lot of love but whom he lost so quickly: his grandfather, his mother, his father, his aunt Ines Moitessier (his father's sister). He wrote to his sister Marie: 'Take courage, my dear, let's struggle in joy, recompense is close... Mother got her recompense 35 years ago already granddad has been with God for 25 years.' (3 March 1899)

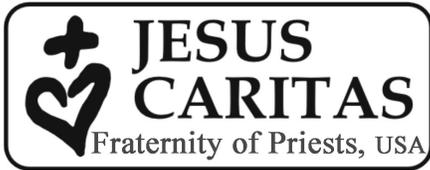
"Make sure that your children are humble. Granddad had that virtue and it looks as if you inherited it from our mother." (7 August 1903)

It is to his mother and to his grandfather that Charles de Foucauld believes he owes the moral and spiritual heritage that influenced the first years of his life. In a unique way he testifies about this in a prayer of thanks where he brings back to memory all the good things that God gave him in his childhood: "O God, we have so many reasons to sing about your mercy. And if all of us have to do that, then how much more should I do it, I who have been inundated with grace. Son of a holy mother through whom I have learned to know you, to love you and to pray to you as soon as I was able to understand. Is not the first thing that I can remember the morning and evening prayer? This was when I prayed: "God, please bless my dad, my mum, my granddad, my grandma Foucauld and my little sister."

And such a pious education! And all these people going to church, bouquets of flowers decorating the crosses, the Christmas cribs, the May greeting, the little altar in my room. I lived a well-protected life from the day that I had a room in my family's house and as long as my faith lasted. I remember going to church with my father and grandfather (that does seem a long time ago)"... (8 November 1897 in Nazareth)

One might ask how important the role of the father could have been in his son's education. Charles de Foucauld speaks about it seldomly. Because of his profession, father often traveled. Then his illness changed his life more and more and also the way in which he was present in his family. In February 1863 he left the family permanently. Charles was then only four and a half. On 23 December 1863 Mde de Foucauld was obliged to apply to a court of law for placing her husband under guardianship, in order to manage the possessions and to take the decisions that had to be taken.

Despite all efforts of mother to hide these problems and her sadness to her children, her son Charles, a lively and intelligent boy, had understood them and he suffered more than she could have imagined or desired.



When it became evident that her husband would not return from his therapy in Paris, Mde de Foucauld gave up the house in Wissembourg and moved to number 3 rue des Echasses, close to where her father lived. She died there 13 March 1864. As cause of her death it was recorded "neuralgia". She died at the age of 35, just like her mother.

Gerard Wackenheim writes: "The shock of what happened has no doubt destroyed her exhausted health." Charles de Foucauld has often written that his mother's last words were those of the Lord in Gethsemani: "God, let your will be done, not mine!" "Was her mission completed?" Gerard Wackenheim asks. She herself probably thought not. Her last words expressed her desperation and despair, but also her surrender. God is the only judge. In the heart of her son, Elisabeth de Foucauld had sown an exceptional capacity to love but also a longing for an extraordinary love. Colonel de Morlet will now take up this thread of education and continue it with care.

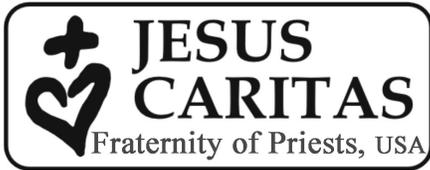
The year during which Charles de Foucauld lost his father, he spent his holidays with his grandmother the Duchessand widow of Duke Charles Armand de Foucauld in Mircourt (Lorraine), where she was born. On a walk Charles sees his grandmother get in panic for something related to his little sister. She suffers a heart attack.

After grandmother's death, the two children return to grand- father de Morlet in Strasbourg. Charles suffers from the death of his mother, the death of his father far away, the sudden death of his grandmother and he is anxious not to cause his grandfather any pain. He is now 6 years old and there is nobody with whom he can talk about his pains and to whom he can ask questions. Loneliness installs itself in Charles' heart despite the presence of his grandfather and grandmother on the mother's side. She takes good care of him and of his little sister. But the boy has nobody to whom he can express his desperation when facing these deaths. He hides his sorrows to his grandfather who is now his only support, but who is also starting to grow old.

In her book "Charles de Foucauld", Marguerite Castillon du Perron mentions this situation: "The property of the family in Birkenwald, west of Marmoutier, becomes a shelter for the young adolescent. He will often return there. Most probably he never returned to Wissembourg because the memory of the lost paradise was too painful."

The castle of his aunt Ines de Moitessier in Louye (Normandy) will become Charles' second shelter. At the age of 10 he begins to know Marie de Moitessier. This niece is seven years older than him. She will become Marie de Bondy, the woman that will have a big influence on his later life. He also meets some Trappist monks there and we know that it is in this Order that he will try to achieve the "lowest place."

After losing all these beloved OMS, Charles also loses his home country, in 1870. The French-German war forces the grand- parents to leave Strasbourg with their grandchildren.



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Fleeing from place to place, the family finally arrives in Nancy - grandfather has opted for the French nation and nationality. Charles' childhood in Alsace has finished.

Despite his first Communion, his Confirmation and the love of his grandparents and niece Marie de Moitessier, Charles loses his faith around 1873. Along with his grandfather, Marie de Moitessier had become the most important person in his life. Marie was married on 11 April 1874 to Count Olivier de Bondy. "Marie is now farther away and Charles turns away from every thing that encouraged him to love." (M. Carrouge)

Grandfather Colonel Morlet died on 3 February 1878. Charles is now left with only his little sister, an orphan just like him. Charles is lonely and he has turned away from God. But God has not abandoned Charles. He is waiting like the Father in the parable of the two lost sons. And God is right!

Observing Charles' wounds, I understand more that people can lose their faith. I hope and often pray that they may encounter people like Marie de Bondy and Abbe Huvelin who can make them understand that the Father is waiting for them and that He is strongly hoping for their return.