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Colloquium of Viviers, July 13-15, 2001, on Charles de Foucauld

Part II by Msgr. Claude Dagens, Bishop of Angouleme, France

Part I: Hiddenness or the Presentation of the Faith?

Before describing the missionary witness and charism of Charles de Foucauld, I owe you an admission which does not require your forgiveness but your understanding. When I was asked for a title for this conference, I succumbed to the temptation to take the easy route. I searched for a memorable formula and I suggested. "From hiddenness to the offering of faith", thus referring to the way in which, in the history of the Church, especially in France, "missionary models" succeeded each other and could be distinguished from each others, compared and contrasted. In line with this idea, one sometimes imagines that after the era of mission in the form of conquest or re-conquest, somewhere around the year 1930 to 1940, came the era of mission in the form of presence to the world, which the Second Vatican Council promoted, and at the very heart of this mission, some people would emphasize headedness, lodged in the heart of areas of poverty, and that today the time for the "offering of faith", for explicit proclamation of Christ and his Gospel has come, practiced in particular by new communities.

Men and women whose lives surprise us: I do not adhere to this kind of "rationalization" of history. I do not think that it is right. It does not take account of the always original way in which the Holy Spirit works in the history of the world and the Church. What is the particular and almost permanent style of the Holy Spirit when it inspires the prophets, apostles and saints? The Holy Spirit is free, at all times, to raise up men and women whose lives surprise us. These men and women are transcended by what they are given to live in the world and the Church in order to cause the Christian "newness" to appear, with special and often unexpected forms, which are able to arouse new energy for the Christian mission.

Not merely original but radical: That is the case with Charles de Foucauld and his missionary witness and charism. And the question that he puts before us is not that of knowing whether he inclined more to the side of hiddenness or more to the side of presentation of the Gospel. The only question that is worthy of him is the following: What does his missionary charism consist of? IN WHAT WAYS IS THIS CHARISM NOT MERELY ORIGINAL BUT RADICAL? And that means, in what ways does he call the entire Church to 'come back to the Gospel' and to the 'one model' of Jesus the Savior, as he wrote himself, which means going to the roots of mission, to the foundation of a Christian existence that is effectively missionary.

A real fecundity: One cannot respond to these questions in the abstract. One has to respond by taking account of the very real fecundity of Charles de Foucauld and his charism over a century. Because this man, who died without any followers, inspired after his death not only a few foundations, in particular those of the Little Brother and the Little Sisters of Jesus, but also, very simple, men and women who live, who pray, who evangelize in his furrow, to the four corners of the world. Our gathering at Viviers witnesses in this fecundity. We are not all affiliated to groups and associations that claim to relate to Charles de Foucauld but we are all, in one way or another, friends of Charles of Jesus. Each of us can say what we have received from him, how we ourselves found in him, in his witness and his writings, an inspiration, a light, a power. And may I not be reproached for anticipating the Church's decision in the way! The Church can only rejoice when the newness of Christ and his Gospel radiates well beyond the usual contexts. I situate myself simply in the line of those who recognize in Charles de Foucauld a gift of God for the renewal of the Christian mission. One simply has to see that it has taken a century for this gift to become evident. An additional reason for understanding in a new way what this gift brings for the times to come, and what Charles de Foucauld says to us on the subject of Christian mission. And I will risk defining it as three terms:



- 1) mission is not a strategy but a form of life
- 2) This form of life is inseparable from an experience of God
- 3) This experience of God inspires a presence to others.

II. MISSION IS NOT A STRATEGY, BUT A FORM OF LIFE

A missionary message

It is clear that the message of Charles de Foucauld is essentially linked to his life, to the unfolding of his own life, starting from the moment when he was seized by God in the church of Saint August in Paris, thanks to Father Huvelin, at the end of October 1886, right up to his death on December 1st 1916 outside his hermitage in Tamanrasset.

Proclamation of the Gospel is linked to life

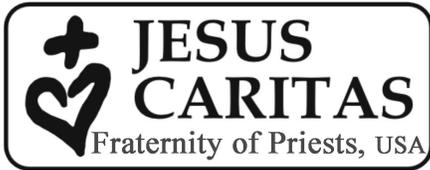
This life and death were very quickly recognized as bearing a missionary message, a call to a new spirit of Christian mission, especially in Africa. That is the conviction Rene Bazin expresses in his own way in his famous biography which he dedicated in 1921 to "the hermit of the Sahara":

"Lord Jesus Christ, mixed in with us, mix yourself with this crowd of people and witnesses who depend on you...Your servant Charles de Foucauld showed the way.. .He was the monk without a monastery, the master without a disciple, the penitent who sustained, in solitude, the hope for a time that he would not see. He died 'in harness' as it were. Because of him, have mercy on them! Give part of your wealth to the poor of Islam and forgive the over-long avarice of the baptized nations". (Rene Bazin, Charles de Foucauld, explorer of Morocco, hermit of the Sahara, 1921, p. 472).

The writings of Charles de Foucauld, which are numerous and varied, were only discovered and known after the fact. And these writings themselves go back primarily to his life and precisely to this insistence that he never renounced: it is it is a matter "of preaching the Gospel from the rooftops, not through words, like St Francis of Assisi, but through one's life" (Meditation at Nazareth on the Old Testament, 1896). Even when he later tried, during his stay in Beni-Abbes and Tamanrasset, to give a concrete and even institutional shape to this plan, he remained faithful to his original intuition: the proclamation of the Gospel is linked to life, to the way of living daily for God and for others. However, this mission that passes through life is in no way a program nor a method. On the contrary, it comes under the sign of the unforeseeable, or, if one prefers, of radical abandonment to God.

Under the sign of the unforeseeable

That is precisely the form that characterizes the whole life of Charles de Foucauld and his charism. Nothing of it was calculated, programmed, organized in advance, right up to the final impression of failure or at least a radical lack of achievement which Charles of Jesus was aware of himself. It was the very vocation of this convert to live his life and mission under the sign of the unforeseeable, which means in a constant attitude of disappropriation of himself. For this former officer of Saint-Cyr, who had fought in the Algerian South, there is in that a radical renunciation, radical by all measures, of every human strategy. And this renunciation was, for him, the subject of a continued apprenticeship. In 1900 he was in Nazareth, three years after having left La Trappe and a year after having come back from Jerusalem. He wrote to Abbe Huvelin. "I am waiting. God himself led me here, through your lips, he has kept me here. Through his own action he brought me back here. I let him direct my life. When he wants me to leave - if this is something he wants, which does not seem to me to be certain - he will show me



clearly through your voice, dear Father, or through events... So I am waiting and I let myself be carried..." (Letter to Abbe Huvelin, March 22, 1900).

A response to the calls of God

Year after year, month after month, from the time of his stay at Notre Dame des Neiges, from 1890, up to his last years in the Sahara, Charles de Foucauld accepted that his life should be, in its entirety, a response to the calls of God, through a total obedience to his superiors, and in a special way, to his director, Abbe Huvelin. For him, that was the choice of a life, a fundamental orientation. Even in 1897, when he was sent to Rome by his superiors at La Trappe, he was still ready for all, through obedience: 'The day when my vocation will seem clearly known by my Father General and my Father Master, and it will seem to them clear that the God does not want me at La Trappe (at least as a Father), they will tell me and require me to withdraw, because they are too conscientious to want to keep me for one single day when they see that the will SB of God is different' (Letter to Madame Bondy, January 15, [j] 1897). A few days later, Brother Marie-Alberic heard that he would not remain at La Trappe and he left for Nazareth, after ^ having taken advice from his director.

Radical abandonment into the hands of God

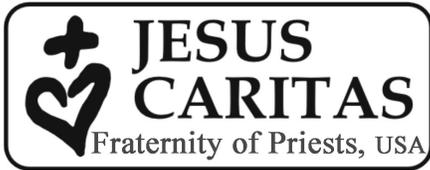
His director, Abbe Huvelin, could only recognize, over the years, that this attitude of radical abandonment into the hands of God was part of the charism of his directee, and he wrote in 1901, recommending Charles de Foucauld's plans to Monsignor Bazin, who was then vicar of the Sahara: "There is nothing bizarre, nothing extraordinary, but an irresistible force that pushes, a tough instrument for a rough labor, that is what Your Greatness will find in Mister de Foucauld. All the objections that come, have come to me so many times! I can only refer to experience and long trials. Firmness, a desire to go to the limit in love and in gift - drawing out all the consequences from that never any discouragement, never - a little harshness previously, but he has softened a lot" (Letter of September 1 st 1901).

In the view of such a discernment, it is not enough to say that the life of Charles de Foucauld comes under the sign of the unforeseeable. It has to be specified that abandonment to God, through obedience, was part of his missionary charism. Or, rather, that the Christian mission itself, which he wished to serve, is placed under the sign of abandonment to God, that in no case can it be a strategy, a human calculation, because it is placed absolutely into the hands of the Father in heaven. These very terms occur in the famous prayer that is attributed to Charles de Foucauld: "My Father, I abandon myself to you..."

A new missionary form?

But it seems to me that one can go further and speak of a new missionary form. New in the sense that the organization of the mission and the means to use in putting it into action are no longer primary. There is even an effective renunciation of all visible and measurable results. And Charles de Foucauld himself drew this attitude from the experience of the Apostles. "In order to convert the world, like the Apostles, in order to be the foundation stone and the Head of the Church, like St Peter, one cannot prepare oneself in advance, nor over years, nor months, nor days, nor a single minute; it is enough to obey God's orders at every moment" (Commentated reading of the Gospel of St Matthew 4:18-20, Nazareth 1897).

In other words, radical abandonment to God inspires a missionary form of life and action that is situated directly in the furrow of the Apostles. Like the first Christian generations, I cannot forget that I used to teach the history of Christian origins and that I found in it the almost experiential verification of this foundational intuition. The first



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Christian generations never programmed their missionary endeavors in the Roman Empire. They simply evangelized by living the Christian 'newness' in the midst of pagan society.

And, in fact, in the final period of his life, Brother Charles of Jesus referred spontaneously to the example of Priscilla and Aquila in imagining a simple mode of evangelization, adapted to each person and going through mutual love:

"Let us do as Priscilla and Aquila did. Let us address ourselves to all those who are around us, to those whom we know, to the one who is close to us: let us take the best means with each person, using words with one, silence with another, and with all, example, goodness, fraternal affection, 'making ourselves all things to all people' in order to gain them all for Jesus" (Letter to Joseph Hours, April 28th 1916). In particular, one should not think too quickly that this simple evangelization, with no calculation, with no prior programming, is an easy evangelization. It is a form of evangelization that remains always new because it is radical, because it calls and requires one to go to the source of Christian existence. If Charles de Foucauld is a model or reference point for the Christian mission, it is because he himself went to the source. And this source was rooted in his experience of God.

III: THIS FORM OF LIFE IS INSEPARABLE FROM AN EXPERIENCE OF GOD

A life centered on God

All those who have stressed the newness of the witness of Charles de Foucauld, from Rene Bazin to Jacques Maritain, by way of Paul Claudel and others, have stressed the radical character of his experience of God. And also the men and women who relate to him and relate to his missionary spirituality, from Madeleine Deibrel to Jacques Loew, and in particular those who live it in a habitual way, following Brother Rene Voillaume and Little Sister Magdeleine.

Seized by God

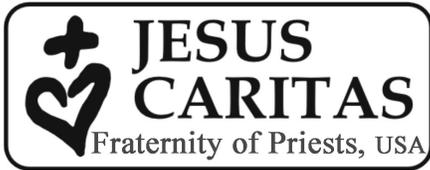
Even though Charles de Foucauld became a passionate lover of Jesus, of his humanity, of his humility, of his Cross, his life remained centered on the mystery of God, untiringly sought, recognized and contemplated.

This man was seized by God. He abandoned himself to him. And this abandonment to God did not just include obedience, the interior struggle, the work on oneself, as one might too easily think. This abandonment to God also inspired him to praise and gratitude.

The greatness and Providence of God

Eleven years after his conversion, in 1897, in his little hermitage at Nazareth, Charles de Foucauld remembered his past life, from the time of his childhood. And he celebrated the mercy of God towards him:

"Ah, my God, we have all sung your mercies, you created us all for eternal glory and ransomed us by the blood of Jesus, by your blood, my Lord Jesus, who are beside me in the Tabernacle, but if we all owe you this, how much more do I, who in my childhood was surrounded by graces... O my God, how you had your hand on me, and how little I felt it! How good you are!



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How you guarded me! How you covered me with your wings when I did not even believe in your existence! And while you were guarding me in this way, time passed, you judged that the moment was coming to bring me back into the fold..." (Meditation at Nazareth, November 1897)

And in 1904, when he became a hermit in the Sahara and was still looking for his way, Brother Charles of Jesus evoked, for his friend Henry de Castries, his absolute confidence in the God who guided his life:

"It is so good to feel that one is in the hand of God, carried by this Creator, supreme goodness, who is love - Deus caritas est - who is Love, the lover, the Spouse of our souls in time and eternity - it is so good to feel oneself carried by this hand through this short life, towards this eternity of light and love for which he created us" (Letter to Henry de Castries, November 1904).

All the writings of Charles de Foucauld are impregnated with the almost immediate sense of the greatness and Providence of God. It is on this foundation of theocentric spirituality that his passion for Jesus, for his Incarnation, for his humanity, for his Cross, developed within him.

A life of imitation of Jesus and his hidden life

We know that the missionary charism of Charles de Foucauld includes at its centre, at its heart, an ardent, intense, persevering desire not only to know Jesus in his humanity, but to imitate him in an almost literal way.

In the life and experience of Brother Charles of Jesus, the principle of Incarnation became a missionary principle. For him it was a matter of conforming his life to Jesus, in a radical way, which meant practicing abasement, humility, poverty, abjection, as Jesus

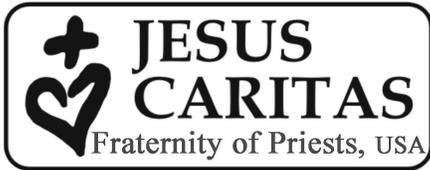
We know that the new convert had been struck hard by something Abbe Huvelin said in one of his sermons, when he said to Jesus, "You took the last place so much that no one has ever been able to take it away from you!"

These words were engraved onto Charles de Foucauld's soul forever. From then on, he tried by every means to share the last place with Jesus.

For him, this was not just a spiritual discovery. It was an orientation of life which would never leave him alone. He could not content himself with proclaiming this Jesus whose passionate disciple he had become. He needed to live from him, effectively sharing his condition, as he understood with intensity during his long- retreat at Nazareth in 1897:

"My Lord Jesus, how quickly the one who loves you with all his heart will become poor, since he will not be able to stand being richer than his Beloved... I cannot conceive of love without a need, an imperative need for conformity, resemblance, and, in particular, for sharing all the pains, all the difficulties, all the hardships of life" (Retreat at Nazareth, November 1897). We know that Charles de Foucauld pushed this spiritual realism, linked to the mystery of Jesus, a long way. He chose to live at Nazareth, or in other words to follow Jesus in the place where the mystery of the Incarnation took place.

One might think that in this way Charles de Foucauld gave an almost tangible form to the great theological affirmations of Abbe Huvelin, which themselves were inspired by Berulle and by the tradition of the French School on the subject of the incarnate Word.



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The mystery of God. humiliated and hidden out of love for us:

It seems to me that we need to go farther, especially if we do not forget that the spiritual experience of Brother Charles of Jesus did not stop at Nazareth, but that it led him into the desert, among the Tuareg nomads.

Perhaps unconsciously, the hermit of Nazareth, then of the Sahara, was fascinated by the mystery of the hidden God who paradoxically reveals himself through the events of the Incarnation, from Bethlehem to Jerusalem going by way of Nazareth. For in Jesus who descends into our humanity: God, at the same time, both reveals himself and conceals himself. And it is this kind of effacement of the glory of God, of loss of self through the Cross, that is found, little by little, at the heart of the spirituality of Charles de Foucauld and also of his missionary charism.

It was a matter of imitating, through his life, the mystery of God, humiliated and hidden out of love for us. Already, from his first pilgrimage in the Holy Land, after his conversion in 1888, the new convert had understood this: the Passion of Jesus points us back to the years of the hidden life in Nazareth. The more he advanced in his life and in the putting into practice of his missionary charism, the more he communicated in this mystery of the God hidden in Jesus Christ:

" He descended with them and came to Nazareth: for the whole of his life, he only descended: descended in incarnating himself, descending in making himself a little child, descended in obeying, descended in making himself poor, abandoned, exiled, persecuted, tortured, always putting himself in the last place" (Meditation on Luke 2:50-51 dated June 20, 1916).

It was this impassioned discovery of the God hidden and humiliated in Jesus Christ that is the foundation for the missionary charism of Charles de Foucauld, or in other words of his desire also to be alongside the humiliated and abandoned people of this world. It was his experience of God that called him to a new form of presence to others.

End