

Charles de Foucauld: A Charism Blossoms After Death

# Generativity beyond frontiers

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*It seemingly happened today instead of a century ago. Charles de Foucauld's generativity manifested itself ten years after his death. He always wanted disciples and even prepared a rule and directory in accordance with the religious style of that time but he never had the joy of welcoming followers in Tamanrasset where he lived. The Spirit's timing was a different one that went far beyond brother Charles' expectations. Twenty-one religious families now lay claim to his charism in their following of the 'beloved brother and the Lord.' The author, Andrea Mandonico, is postulator for de Foucauld's cause of canonization and reflects here on the fruitfulness of his charism.*

"My son, it just doesn't seem adapted for guiding other souls. This rule is totally impracticable. As to how I see it, I have no doubt. The Pope hesitated to approve the Franciscan rule, thinking it was too severe...But, truthfully, yours terrifies me! Spend your life at the gate of a community if you choose, in the abjection you desire...But don't lay down any rule, I beg you...Above all, don't found anything. If you couldn't abide the spirit of St Bernard and the Trappists, choose another life...But I beg you not to draw companions with you."<sup>1</sup>

This was written by Abbé Huvelin on August 2, 1896 to Brother Charles de Foucauld as he was preparing to leave the Trappist monastery he had entered in 1890 because it lacked the radicality he sought. He hoped to attract others to join him and drew up a rule of life for them. Despite his spiritual director's plea, he never gave up rewriting, re-editing and updating his rule. He was even thinking of a woman's branch and was tirelessly looking for companions to share in his charism right up to his death in 1916. He did find one, Michel, who admired the holiness of brother Charles. But after three months he had to return to the White Fathers since de Foucauld's lifestyle exhausted him.

It was only after his death that spiritual sons and daughters were born, showing that the generativity of a charism does not depend on the founder's ability to fascinate and attract followers, going beyond even the 'frontier' of death. After various attempts—we are thinking of Charles Henrion, Emile Malcor, and P. Periguère—there are now 21 Institutes of consecrated life, Secular Institutes, Fraternities, Spiritual Associations and Movements inspired by de Foucauld and recognized by the Church, along with other ecclesial realities which are still emerging.

**The Charism of Nazareth**

‘He who loves wants to imitate—it is the secret of my life: I lost my heart in this Jesus of Nazareth crucified 1900 years ago and all my life I have tried to imitate him as much as my weakness allowed me.’ Without a doubt, in this short phrase written to a friend, we have the most beautiful definition that Charles de Foucauld ever gave of himself and his quest. After his conversion, his story was a continual attempt at imitating Jesus of Nazareth, the face of Jesus ‘glimpsed while walking the streets of Nazareth,’ just after his conversion as he describes. There he discovered the true face of Jesus revealed through ‘the humble and obscure existence of the divine worker of Nazareth’. Jesus had learned to be a man like us at Nazareth, sharing the life of his fellow countrymen and cultivating a fraternity open to all, especially to the poorest, along with a very intimate relationship with God whom he called ‘Abba,’ father.

The cornerstones upon which these 21 spiritual families are founded involve a deep life of contemplation of the mystery of God and brotherhood with all, especially the poorest. They make their own what brother Charles wrote: ‘I want all the inhabitants, Christians, Muslims, Jews, idolators, to see in me a brother...a universal brother.’ This requires journeying at their pace, not going ahead of them, increasing in humanity with each individual and allowing the gift placed in them by God to emerge by loving and respecting the free response each one gives to the inspiration of the Spirit.

It is a matter of living ‘the life of Nazareth where the Lord has placed them.’ Therefore, although having a fundamental charism in common, each Fraternity lives it concretely in their own place.

### **A multifold charismatic family**

A few examples of this charismatic flourishing:<sup>4</sup>

a. *The Little Brothers of Jesus*, founded by René Voillaume. They seek to live the contemplative charism of adoration, following Jesus in becoming brothers of whoever they meet and to be one with the poorest. Thus, they share the conditions of life of ‘poor people’ since ‘the human face of Jesus’ (Mt 25) is ever more clearly revealed in them. They will be workers with the workers, farmers with farmers, bricklayers and tradesmen, etc.

b. *The Little Sisters of Jesus* founded by Little Sister Magdeleine Hutin. They live a contemplative life among the people, the poor, sharing their condition of life, work and living conditions. They want their communities to be an open door, a place of welcome, friendship and fraternity. They pay particular attention to Muslims and those on the margins of society in many countries throughout the world, seeking to reveal God’s tenderness and goodness to them.

c. *The Secular Fraternities*. For married people, families and those who have chosen a celibate life, the mystery of Nazareth consists in welcoming Jesus who is celebrated and adored in the Eucharist. It is shouting out the Gospel through daily witness, closeness to the poor as a living presence of Christ in the world and communion and friendship with all the Churches, religions and peoples on earth. We can learn what Christian life is by looking at them!

d. *The Missionaries of the Servant Jesus*. Founded in 1979 in Vietnam in service to ethnic minority groups, this Secular Institute has three branches: consecrated, consecrated and associated celibates, and married people. ‘We try to fully live the Gospel, to practice

fraternal charity, to live in silence, in poverty and in work like Jesus of Nazareth. We strive to live in close relationship with the Eucharist and united to the sacrifice of Jesus.'

e. *The Priestly Fraternity Jesus Caritas* brings together diocesan priests from five continents who want to live their life and priestly ministry in the light of Charles de Foucauld. They dedicate time to daily adoration of the Lord in the Eucharist and carry out the 'Month of Nazareth' – a month-long retreat in the style of Jesus of Nazareth -- monthly desert days, and fraternal meetings with a Gospel revision of life. They aim at nourishing their charism with a burning love of 'Jesus Caritas' and carry out pastoral activities 'only for the sake of Jesus and the Gospel.' They too cultivate universal fraternity through a simple life close to the people, united with that portion of the people of God entrusted to them by their local bishop in the name of the Church. With a full and ecumenical heart, they unreservedly consecrate themselves to God and humanity in their respective region.

### **Witnesses of the charism**

To continue to live brother Charles' charism, various members of his spiritual family make their own what he himself wrote to the French journalist, Joseph Hours, about the evangelization of the Tuareg: 'Every Christian should be an apostle. This is not counsel but a commandment, the commandment of love. How to be an apostle? The best way is to adapt ourselves to the people we are reaching out to. But with no exceptions, with kindness, tenderness, fraternal affection, the attractive example of virtue and therefore Christian humility and sweetness. With those who never speak of God or religion, wait patiently because God waits patiently. Be good as God is good, loving and tender as prayerful brothers. Speaking of God with others insofar as they can understand...Especially see a brother or sister in every human being'<sup>5</sup> and especially 'see [in the poorest] the representatives of Jesus, Jesus himself.'<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Charles de Foucauld - Abbé Huvelin, *20 ans de correspondance entre Charles de Foucauld et son directeur spirituel (1890-1910)*, edited by Jean-François Six and Brigitte Cuisinier, Nouvelle Cité, Bruyères-le-Châtel 2010, p. 93; tr. it., Charles de Foucauld - Don Huvelin, *Corrispondenza inedita*, Borla, Torino 1965.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to Gabriel Tourdes, 7 March 1902.

<sup>3</sup> Letter to Louis de Foucauld of Nazareth, 12 April 1897.

<sup>4</sup> I take these examples from nn. 157-158 of *Jesus Caritas*, April 2020, the Italian family's journal of spirituality, and from *Charles de Foucauld et sa famille spirituelle*, a brochure edited by the International Association of the spiritual family of Charles de Foucauld, Rome 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Charles de Foucauld, *Correspondances lyonnaises (1904-1916)*, Ed. Karthala, Paris 2005, pp. 90-94.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, *Non c'è distanza per i cuori che si amano. Lettere alla sorella Marie*, (Cantalupa: Effatà Editrice, 2020), pp. 98-99.