

PÈRE DE FOUCAULD AND HIS FRATERNITIES¹

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WHEN a saint reaches universality, his original background and personal characteristics sink into comparative unimportance. God's possession of him has carried him beyond these things. Now, Charles de Foucauld, Brother Charles of Jesus, came from a very old family of the French nobility. His was a rich heritage of ancestral virtues and heroic chivalry. He himself was an officer and an explorer. He was thus quite thoroughly not only a man of his country, but a man of a particular period of his country's history as well. In short, nothing would have seemed to have destined him in any particular way for a rôle as world-wide as the one we now know he was to have. Yet, once converted, he gave himself so utterly to our Lord, and his life turned into one so in keeping with the Gospel, that the witness he bore has in fact become universal. In other words, he became like a 'little brother of Jesus', as we say, and consequently, as he used to put it himself, a 'universal little brother'.

After seven years generously devoted to life in a Trappist cloister, he felt himself irresistibly impelled towards a very literal imitation of Jesus working at Nazareth. He therefore set out on his quest in the self-chosen abasement of an all-but-penniless vagabond. From then on, he was to lead, first, the life of a domestic servant in Nazareth, devoting every hour he could spare from his chores to adoring Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. Later, in the Hoggar desert, it was to be the life of a very poor priest, almost a wanderer, in fact, but a wanderer consumed with the love of God and the desire of the apostle. Here he shared the life of the poorest of nomad tribes. By making himself simply their friend—their friend and brother—he hoped to reveal to them something of Jesus—something of Jesus showing, as it were, through his own silence. For our Lord was more and more the

¹ The text of a talk given at the Aquinas Centre, St Dominic's Priory, London, N.W.5, on May 15, 1958.

sole driving-force of his existence. With his mind full of plans and his heart full of hopes, he wrote two different Rules for a Congregation; solicited clerical authorizations; searched about for possible Brothers, while waiting expectantly for candidates to be sent to join him in a 'fraternity', as he already styled it, big enough for several men. But he died in the end with all his desires apparently come to naught. On the 1st of December, 1916, at Tamanrasset in the heart of the mountains of the Hoggar, he was quietly writing letters in his mud dwelling, towards seven o'clock in the evening, when someone knocked at the door. He asked who it was. Outside stood a band of raiders from Tripolitania. But the answer that came was: 'Your mail, Father.' And in fact it *was* mail day. So Père de Foucauld unbolted the door and slipped out his hand for his mail. They seized his hand; dragged him outdoors; forced him to his knees; tied his wrists behind him to his ankles, and put a young Touareg to keep guard over him while they went inside to pilfer. A few minutes later, frightened no doubt by the sight of two Meharist soldiers approaching at a distance on their camels with the mail, the young Touareg placed his carbine against Père de Foucauld's temple and pulled the trigger. Slowly, the body drooped to one side without his having even uttered a sound. Nineteen years before, he had made this note in his diary: 'Remember that you are to die a martyr, despoiled of everything, stretched out on the earth naked, unrecognizable, covered with wounds and blood, killed with violence and in great pain. Remember this and hope it may be today.'

As time went on, it would have seemed as if the very memory of Père de Foucauld were fleeing from the desert. The houses he had lived in were crumbling from neglect. To all appearances, his work had come to an end with his life. Then, some ten years after his death, two or three solitary disciples, invincibly attracted by the example of a life so purely and totally evangelical, quietly settled in Southern Tunisia and the mountainous district of Central Morocco. Then, as from 1933, three different Congregations sprang up separately, one after the other—the Congregation of the Little Brothers of Jesus and two Congregations of Sisters. Today these number more than nine hundred religious. Little by little, the resulting spiritual movement spread to other circles and, first, a group of lay people came together in an association, and

then three Secular Institutes began taking shape. One of these is for laymen, one for laywomen, and one for diocesan priests. Meanwhile, the cause of beatification, introduced some time ago at Rome, seems normally promising, and on the 15th of September we shall be celebrating the centenary of Brother Charles of Jesus's birth. In fact, this year will have been marked, I believe, by a still more rapid expansion of his spiritual legacy in various parts of the world. This legacy is twofold: a spirituality and a new form of the religious life. It is more particularly the latter that I now propose to comment upon, as being the most concrete of the varying expressions of the spirituality.

The Little Brothers' Fraternities may be characterized by pointing to three of their aspects in particular; and it is the same with the Fraternities of the Little Sisters of Jesus. These are their poverty—in imitation of Jesus at Nazareth; adoration of the Blessed Sacrament—so as to be saviours with Jesus; and a silent apostolate through their mere presence in a very simple, unobtrusive and fraternal kind of friendship, an apostolate meant more particularly for the more abandoned strata of society.

The early years of Père de Foucauld's religious life were marked by an almost insatiable need of poverty. This phase of his personal vocation, as I have already suggested, took the form of a constant effort to imitate our Lord in his ordinary human life at Nazareth. As he wrote at the time: 'As for me, I cannot conceive of loving Jesus without a constraining need of imitation or without the sharing of each cross.' He pictured the Holy Family as quite poor people working every day to keep themselves clothed and fed, living in a modest little house amid the poor inhabitants of Nazareth. Nor would he rest until he had achieved to the letter a similar life of toil and poverty in all its reality. While a Trappist, he had succeeded in getting himself sent to the poorest of the Trappist monasteries, at Akbès in a mountainous part of Northern Syria. Here he had attained personal poverty and spiritual poverty alike, but there still remained the framework of the monastic life, and this kept him still unappeased. One day, his Father Abbot had sent him to sit up with the body of a poor Christian worker who had just died in the village near the monastery. By the time he returned to the monastery, he had been impressed so deeply by the poverty he had seen, that he made this note in his notebook: 'What a painful difference between these buildings of ours and

that poor working man's hovel! I am not yet satisfied. It is Nazareth I want.' It was this 'constraining need' in him, to do as Jesus had done, that was not yet satisfied. 'If Jesus were alive today', he told himself, 'he would be living like that working man, and in just such a house.' This may be seen from the Rule he wrote in 1896, which shows very clearly how he wished to live at the time—not alone, again, by any means, but with a few Little Brothers. What he prescribed in this document was a mud house with two rooms; manual work eight hours a day; no provisions for tomorrow's meals; no fresh sets of clothes; no footwear—all this in accordance with his idea of imitating the Holy Family at Nazareth.

It may not be easy to understand, at first sight, just what a life of poverty like this meant to Père de Foucauld. When the word 'poverty' is used in speaking of religious, it can have one of three meanings. It may designate the poverty of the Beatitudes, an interior virtue of detachment. This is the essential thing, of course—the objective to be reached—the virtue praised by Jesus when he said: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit.' Secondly, one may mean the vow of poverty, that is renunciation of the personal right to property, linked up with the possession in common of necessities and a particular and simple standard of living determined by the constitutions. Thirdly, the word 'poverty' may be taken as referring to a status in the world like that of people who have nothing to call their own, and possess no other means of livelihood but what they can earn from day to day by working. The consequence of such a situation for a religious is poverty in the social sense of the term, poverty as a member of society. He is not only a non-owner, if I may say so, but is dealt with by society, and those in it who *are* owners, like a poor man, like one of the 'under-privileged'. The idea is to be socially a poor man, and to be treated as such and not shut up in the dignity customarily surrounding religious. When Charles de Foucauld went to Nazareth for the first time, he dressed himself so like a vagabond that the street-urchins threw stones at him; and he was at the height of delight at this success. Fear lest he should be prevented from keeping faith with this kind of poverty held him for a long time aloof from the idea of the priesthood. In fact, he consented only once he had come to see that he must join the two things together, conciliate the religious or priestly state with being

socially poor. This side of the vocation is particularly difficult for the Little Brothers to keep to—being a priest or a religious, but remaining at the same time a poor man, truly a poor man, and a worker, and not having the social rank in which Christian society, practically the world over, has ranged its clergy and its religious. It is difficult but essential. An effort of the imagination may perhaps be required to see why being and remaining simply the brother—not the benefactor but the brother—the brother and friend of the unemployed and the vagrant and the very poor worker, necessarily means that the Little Brother must share the same conditions as regards dress, housing and employment. But beneath it all, there lies a need dictated by a love, a need to imitate Jesus, to live as Jesus lived at Nazareth, sharing the life, the circumstances, the burden of the worker and the other poor. This is why the Little Brothers usually wear their religious habit only in chapel; why they live in native huts among the African peoples, in tents among the nomads, in rickety cabins in the poor sections of large cities. There is no desire here just to be different. Neither is there any mere reaction against perfectly proper habits and customs which obtain in other religious congregations. No more is there anything resembling an absence of constraint or uncontrolled experimentation. The point to be properly grasped is simply this need—this need to be a witness to the living love of Jesus, and so to give his kind of friendship, and prove it by submitting to the fact that it is between equals that friendship is most easily born. It is also true, of course, that a Little Brother, in his heart, must in no way feel superior to the most wretched or primitive of men.

In each Fraternity—for this is the term we apply to our small groups and the places they live in—there is a chapel containing the Blessed Sacrament. Fundamentally the Little Brothers are like Père de Foucauld himself, contemplatives offering their lives of work and poverty every day, in order to save their brothers in union with Jesus's own offering in the Eucharist. Under normal circumstances, the Blessed Sacrament is exposed at the end of each day, and the Brothers adore for an hour. They also get up at night for the same purpose at certain times. This point is one of particular importance to an adequate understanding of the life of the Little Brothers. It is through their adoration of the Eucharist that their vocation enables them to act on men the most effectively.

This is their particular mission. Saint Teresa of the Child Jesus went into the Carmel because she wanted to be a missionary in all the different missions together. You may recall this passage from her writings: 'I had come to see that all vocations were summed-up in love; that love was all in all; that it embraced all places and all time.' The special thing about the Little Brothers, as also the Little Sisters, is that they pursue this contemplative effort of adoration in small chapels buried, as it were, in the midst of the masses of the peoples. Their chapels are not only small but often neither too comfortable nor too quiet to pray in, as is the case when they are situated, say, in some very noisy populous section of an Indian or African town. This effort to combine their 'presence to men', as one of our favourite phrases goes, with contemplation is thus not without its ascetic side. It might be better to say that mortification is here coupled with asceticism. And if the difficulty of it is a difficulty proper to the Little Brothers, it makes the strength of their vocation too. Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament in the midst of everyday life is likewise viewed as an outward sign. It is a comfort to the Christian toiler, and the example of the Brothers' prayer is also more effective both with believers and with the others. Managing to pray under such conditions of course implies not only this rather special ascetic approach, but also great reliance upon Jesus's promise concerning prayer and the action of the Holy Spirit.

As the Little Brothers are especially dedicated to the Eucharist, there must of course be priests among them. A Fraternity without a priest can remain faithful to the full implications of the Eucharistic life only with difficulty. For it is not only through adoration of the Blessed Sacrament in exposition, but also through the Mass, that Jesus is enabled to be present in the very lives of the Little Brothers, present with his Cross; working to save men through the Brothers' trials and troubles and prayer. To remember, to be conscious of this must be their constant concern.

Here, I realize, various questions may arise in people's minds. Let us take this one, for instance: 'Would it not be possible for the Brothers to carry out this apostolic mission through prayer still better, after all, if they enjoyed more favourable conditions? Why make innovations? Surely the Little Brothers cannot hope to do better than Saint Teresa and the Carmelites, for example.' The Little Brothers are thoroughly alive to objections like this,

but the fact is they do not respond to vocations like the Carmelite or Trappist. Once in, they would do as Père de Foucauld did, and come out. If anything is certain, it is that Père de Foucauld felt literally forced to come out and go to the poor, so as to carry Jesus to those who were waiting, and to do so more through his own way of living than by word of mouth. The ultimate motive behind this difficult kind of life, behind this apparently unrealizable junction between a pressing prayer of supplication and the daily drawbacks and worries of the life of the poor, is the apostolate, the call of those to whom Jesus is not known.

But why, then, it may be asked, should direct action not be added to the rest? Why not organized works, an active ministry, preaching? If the reason for the Fraternities not being enclosed is of an apostolic and missionary nature, why stop half-way? What is the good of these men wearing themselves down with toll-taking privations, especially in bad climates like some in the tropics; risking the ruin of their health at work presumably often too hard for them, or at least requiring too much of their time? Well, let me confess that I never quite know how to explain this side of our lives when I find it is not being sensed immediately. I can say little more than this: it is a need of the love of Jesus, a demand of Christian friendship. But I think the answer *could* be found. If one were to question the people among whom the Brothers live and work, I believe *they* might be able to tell. Be that as it may, it could hardly be said that their lack of organization prevents the Brothers speaking of Jesus and making him known; only they do so quite naturally on the immediate plane of friendly relations.

Pursuing the apostolate through friendship can perhaps be best described as making oneself a brother—a Little Brother—to every man, and trying to help men to discover, through this means, something of the love God has for them, very likely without their knowing anything about it. To love the unhappy or unfortunate man for his own sake, without asking anything of him—not even that he listen to our preaching—is to love a little as God himself loves, that is, first—like the father of the prodigal son, who threw himself upon his son's neck without waiting to see whether he was sorry or would ask forgiveness or not.

This form of the apostolate, in appearance no more surely effective than organized, is obviously not complete. I should

not like to give you the impression that the Little Brothers and Little Sisters imagine they meet all the needs of the apostolate. Far from it. What they do, or rather what the example of their lives does, is, in some spots, to prepare people's hearts to receive the Gospel and, in others, to understand the Gospel better. They prepare the way for preaching, or else illustrate the preaching there may be with a living lesson of faith, prayer and actual practice of what Jesus says in the Gospel. I am speaking of course of their aim, not their achievements.

For these different reasons, the Fraternities' apostolate is clearly suited more especially to certain environments. First among these are those environments which are impervious to preaching, because they are too sure of their own truth, for example, the Muslims and the Marxists. There is nothing to be done here but live Christian love and prayer among them in silence. The Brothers therefore simply go out and settle quietly, unobtrusively, and let the Gospel show itself through their life.

The Brothers go too among those who cannot ordinarily be reached by the Church's preaching, owing to the kind of life they live. Of such are the nomadic peoples, the deep-sea fishers and seamen in general. The only possibility here is actually to lead the same life and share the same occupations. Something rather striking in this respect is the natural sort of partiality which is to be found among some of the Brothers—and, strangely enough, even more markedly among the Sisters—for the nomads: the Arabs of the Sahara, the Touaregs of the Hoggar, the herdsmen in the region of the Niger, and the many other nomadic populations in the world. There are millions of them still, millions to whom the Gospel has never even been presented.

The Fraternities also go and settle among peoples that especially need to be shown fraternal respect, either because they are still primitive or because they constitute despised minorities. In sharing their lives, the Brothers simply wish to make them feel such respect, and help them in any other way they can as disinterested friends. There are Fraternities like this among the Pygmies in the equatorial forest, among the Bushmen in South Africa, the Indians in South America, and the coloured minorities in certain other countries.

Another kind of men I wish to mention, and then I shall have finished, are those who are really cut off from the world in a

particular way, and therefore need fraternal friendship, perhaps more than anything else. I refer more especially to the lepers and the inmates of prisons. There are both Brothers and Sisters with the lepers in Africa and Korea, and even in Europe, striving above all to bring them an atmosphere of normal human contact. But it is possibly the way the Brothers and Sisters devote themselves to those in gaol that best exemplifies their vocation, because here you have it in an ultimate sort of expression. Generally speaking, convicts—men and women condemned by society—are certainly among the most despised of human beings. Yet we owe them the love of Christ. Now, there are, I suggest, three different ways of succouring them. The chaplain of the gaol will visit them to offer direct religious comfort, add to their knowledge of the faith, give them the sacraments, say Mass for them in the chapel—and this, of course, is a very great good. Then the social assistant, or some other charitable visitor, will call and help with things they need, and will also see their families and provide them likewise with assistance, if necessary. This, too, is a great good when it is done with real heart and spontaneous simplicity. A third way of displaying Christian love towards these people is to share their confinement with them; simply share their confinement and try to bring them the mere fact, the live reality, of the presence of a friend. The good of feeling themselves loved for their own sakes has indeed proved to be all we thought when starting. This has been done in several instances—in Brazil, France, Portugal and Switzerland—where Brothers or Sisters have succeeded in being admitted as prisoners, placed under the gaol rule, treated exactly like the inmates, doing the same kind of work and altogether really undergoing their condition with them. Something quite big has always happened as a result. Yet the Little Brother (or Little Sister) does nothing special, and has nothing to give but himself. When Jesus hung on the Cross, he did something very similar: he gave the thief next him his friendship. He neither delivered him from his sentence nor relieved his suffering in any other manner. Theirs was the same lot. But the effect of Jesus's friendship was to open up another world where the thief, convicted in *this* one, would have his own place. It is much the same thing that their vocation requires of the Little Brothers and Little Sisters—that they shall open up another world, through their friendship, to the poor and the unfortunate whose lives they

share. And to achieve this, one must doubtless suffer the Cross—like Jesus; with Jesus.

Such, briefly told, is the ideal of our Fraternities. The other groups, secular or otherwise, which I referred to earlier, pursue the same spirituality in different ways, but always with these notes: love of Jesus, spirit of poverty, adoration of the Eucharist, and fraternal friendship towards all. Convinced as we are that Père de Foucauld was chosen by our Lord to be a guide for our time, we follow him, quite simply, as best we can, in the hope of fulfilling a new vocation in the Church.

NOTICE

Readers whose appetites have been whetted by the above article will find a fuller account of Charles de Foucauld's spiritual legacy in *SEEDS OF THE DESERT* (Burns and Oates, 16s.), a translation and adaptation by Willard Hill of Père Voillaume's *Au Coeur des Masses*. As for de Foucauld's own spiritual development, an important new source is *PÈRE DE FOUCAULD, ABBÉ HUVELIN: CORRESPONDANCE INÉDITE* (Desclée), which covers the period from 1890 till Huvelin's death in 1910.