

Seven

Charles de Foucauld

On December 1, 1916, at Tamanrasset, deep in the Moroccan Sahara, Bedouin soldiers entered the small whitewashed house of the only European within hundreds of miles. He was the French missionary, Father Charles de Foucauld. They ordered him to kneel down. One pressed the barrel of his gun to the priest's neck.

Charles was 58 years old. Born at Strasbourg, brought up in a traditionally pious Catholic family, he had lost his faith as a college student at Nancy. For five years he had served as a French soldier in Algeria and Morocco, a period of loose living and dissipation, but also of adventure and courage. Then, after his conversion to Christ at the age of 28, his life had become totally geared to an ever increasing conformity to his Master. He had spent seven years as a Trappist contemplative, three as a solitary monk at Nazareth. Ordained a priest in 1901, he had given 15 years of Christian witness and priestly service in lonely outposts of the Tuareg mission. Now the moment to meet his Master had come.

Charles' thoughts at that moment have not been recorded. But we know from his letters and spiritual notebooks that he had fully realized the risks inherent in his undertaking. His mind was prepared for it. He had lived in the shadow of death ever since he entered Morocco as the first resident missionary.

The less of everything we have, the more like the crucified Jesus we are. I should have nothing more or better than Jesus of Nazareth had it. . . . I should live today as though faced with the prospect of dying this

evening as a martyr. "One thing is necessary": to do at all times what would be most pleasing to Jesus, to be continually ready for martyrdom and accept it without a shadow of a defense, as did the divine Lamb, doing so in Jesus through Jesus and for Jesus."¹

The soldier pulled the trigger. Charles was dead. But his influence did not die. His humility, his poverty of life, his apostolate through simple witness, have inspired new initiatives in the church. Many have decided to follow in his footsteps, chief among whom are the Little Brothers and Sisters of Charles de Foucauld. As the model of a new missionary approach, Charles continues to attract many to his lifestyle. Scores of books are written about this. What many people do not realize is that Charles' convictions came from daily meditations on the word of God, meditations which were for him a real experience of hearing God speak. It is this aspect of his life I will discuss in this chapter.

Hours With Jesus

When Charles decided not to take his final vows in the Trappist order, it was because even such a monastic life seemed to him too luxurious and protected. At his own request he lived in the Trappist monastery at Staoueli near Akbes in Syria. His cell was bare, his meals frugal. It was not poor enough for Charles. "To the rich we are poor, but we are not poor as our Lord was."² The monastic rules and regulations prevented the greater detachment, the more unconditional surrender he was dreaming of.

From 1897 to 1900 Charles realized his dream in Nazareth. He was employed as a servant of the Poor Clares. He slept in a little hut in the monastery garden, did manual work during the day and spent the rest of his time in study and meditation. It came as close to Jesus' hidden life as possible. In one of his meditations he has our Lord say:

"Look at the life I have fashioned for you: could it possibly parallel my hidden life more perfectly? . . . You are living it at Nazareth, unknown, inordinately poor, lonely in your smock and sandals, a poor servant to poor nuns. Some take you for a laborer of the lowest kind; others think you are an outcast; some think you are perhaps the son of a criminal. Most—nearly all, in fact—take you for a fool. You obey the nuns and the portresses as I obeyed my parents. You give orders to nobody, absolutely no one."³

Charles would get up at first light. On rising, he would say matins, then meditate on the gospels before going to the chapel to hear Mass. As he had the custom of jotting down what occurred to him during these gospel meditations, we have a fair idea of how he went about them and what form they took.

One of the methods used by Charles was the following: After reading the scripture text with great attention, he would first ask in prayer, "What do you want to say to me, O God?" Forcing himself to silence, and listening intently to God, he would, as it were, hear God put into words the message contained in the biblical text. He would write down these words as he knew God spoke them to him. Then he would make a declaration in response, "For my own part, this is what I want to tell you." After this, he would remain in God's presence in loving silence, "saying nothing else, gazing on the Beloved."⁴ The message of the gospel meditation would remain with him throughout the day, especially during the periods he spent in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament.

In Luke 6:27-42, for example, Jesus tells us: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you. . . . If anyone hits you on one cheek, let him hit the other one too; . . . Give to everyone who asks you for something, and when someone takes what is yours, do not ask for it back. . . . Be merciful. . . . Do not judge

others. . . . Why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye. . . ?" When meditating on this passage, Charles first prayed, "Speak to me, Lord, for your servant is listening!" Then Jesus' answer came to him:

"All these commandments are the precepts of charity. You would not find them surprising if you could once and for all really grasp that all human beings together make up a single family. God is their common father, creator and preserver. He is father to all men equally. He loves all human beings incomparably more than the most loving father loves his children. . . . Carve deeply into the foundations of your soul the chief commandment from which all the others spring: all human beings are really and truly *brothers* in God. He is their common father. It is his will that all human beings should look on one another, love one another and treat one another in every way as the fondest of brothers."⁵

The part of scripture that inspired Charles most was the hidden life of Jesus. At the words, "They returned to their home town of Nazareth in Galilee" (Lk 2:39), Charles had an intimate conversation with Jesus through which he gave expression to his deepest convictions. The meditation can be reconstructed as the following dialogue:

"After my presentation and my flight into Egypt, I withdrew to Nazareth. There I spent the years of my childhood and youth till I was thirty years of age. Once again, it was for your sake I went there, for love of you."

"What was the meaning of that part of your life, Lord?"

"I led it for your instruction. I instructed you continually for thirty years, not in words, but by my silence and example."

"What was it you were teaching me, Lord?"

"I was teaching you primarily that it is possible to do

good to men—great good, infinite good, divine good—without using words, without preaching, without fuss, but by silence and by giving them a good example.”

“What kind of example, Lord?”

“The example of devotion, of duty towards God lovingly fulfilled, and goodness towards all men, loving kindness to those about one and domestic duties fulfilled in holiness. The example of poverty, lowliness, recollection, withdrawal, the obscurity of a life hidden in God, a life of prayer, penance, and withdrawal, completely lost in God, buried deep in him.”⁶

Experience of God?

No one can fail to see that Charles' decisions and actions flowed from his interpretation of the gospels. Charles had internalized the gospel texts. Until his death he was to continue this practice of assimilating at a very deep level the example and words of his divine Master.

Did he have a tangible experience of God? There is no doubt he did. But, fortunately for us ordinary mortals, as far as we know, it never expressed itself in an extraordinary form. Charles did not claim to have visions, nor did he wake up at night to hear an audible voice. Charles had to meet God, as most of us have to, in the stillness of his heart.

Before his conversion Charles had prayed, “Oh God, if you exist, let me know of your existence.” Charles' spiritual notes are a continuous testimony to the fact that God had heard this prayer. He had made himself known in an unmistakable manner. Never again would Charles doubt the presence of God, though at times God might hide his face. He could write: “I think I see my God clearly. Give me full enlightenment, oh God, so that I may act in the certain knowledge of doing your will, for this is the food by

which I long to live always.”⁷ He also knew periods of darkness and confusion. “God sometimes allows us to be in such profound darkness that not a single star shines in our skies.”⁸ This is the ordinary experience of the believing Christian. He has heard God speak; he continues on his journey even in times of discouragement and desolation.

We can recognize the Spirit by the effects he produces: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility and self-control (Gal 5:22-23). These were the signs by which Charles too knew that God was at work in him. The following excerpts speak for themselves:

My spiritual life is filled with the presence of Our Lord.

“You gave me a tender and increasing love for you, O Jesus, and a taste for prayer, trust in your word, a longing to imitate you.”

“You dwell in the faithful soul, my Lord: ‘we shall come to it, and make our dwelling with it.’ You become, as it were, the soul’s soul; your grace supports it in all situations, enlightens its understanding, guides its will. It is no longer the soul that does things, but you in it. You give it life, the life of grace, the seed of the life in glory, in growing abundance. You give it truth, firmly establishing it, giving it a taste for it, opening its eyes to it, making it see things with the eyes of faith.”

“I am plunged deep in your mercies. I drown in them. They cover me, wrapping me round on every side.”

The state of my soul is unchanged: I am always full of joy, rejoicing at the feet of Jesus. The simplicity of my life is profoundly pleasant to me, these long lonely hours of prayer and reading, spent so simply. I am quite overcome, and I marvel at the way God guides my soul.⁹

Prayer and Action

We live in a time with heavy stress on Christian involvement. We are repeatedly warned of the danger of spiritual escapism. Christians have a task in the social and political liberation that is to be achieved within the present world; prayer and belief in afterlife cannot dispense a Christian from commitment to building up the kingdom of heaven on earth.

Involvement is, indeed, a Christian virtue, but isn't there a danger, too, of neglecting the spiritual dimension of life? Is our experience of God, perhaps, impoverished by an involvement that is too one-sidedly social and political?

Charles de Foucauld may teach us a lesson in this respect. Charles too believed in action. When he left Nazareth in order to be ordained a priest and when he decided to return to North Africa as a missionary, he did so because he was concerned about the people there. Charles was indignant about the injustices committed by the colonizing powers toward the indigenous population. Frequently he complained that the Europeans—government officials, soldiers, businessmen—had no real respect or regard for the original inhabitants of the country. They were only interested in furthering their own ends without real care for the others. Charles did not preach revolution nor did he mix in politics. Instead, he decided to give a counter-witness of love because he was convinced this is what Jesus would have done. He learned the Tuareg language. Both at Beni-Abbès and at Tamanrasset Charles lived among the ordinary people in a small house, sharing in their everyday joys and sorrows. As their "universal brother," he looked after the sick, cooking food for them and cleaning their wounds. When no rains fell for 17 months in 1907-1908, Charles helped as much as he could to fight general starvation. He distributed so much of his own stores to needy families that he himself fell ill with exhaustion and under-

nourishment. For long periods he traveled around as a nomad, living in a tent, constantly moving from place to place. Wherever he was, he tried to be friendly and accessible.

Charles realized that his own contribution could only be a small part in a much wider overall apostolate. He was convinced that the message of Christ would only penetrate the Muslim world if many more like himself were prepared to live a life of simple gospel witness among Muslims. That's why he worked hard at establishing a congregation of followers; why he insisted—with great farsightedness—that lay people would play a greater role in the mission of the future; why he dreamed of having a book published to appeal to idealistic Christian volunteers. Charles would, no doubt, have had great sympathy for nationalistic uprisings or the freedom struggles of oppressed social classes. But true to the gospel—and, perhaps, again with great farsightedness—he never put great hopes on changes effected by guns and bloodshed. For him, the kingdom of God could only come by a change of heart, by the testimony of the Spirit: love, concern, friendliness and charity.

Such a spiritual witness of love can be sustained only by a person who leads a spiritual life himself. Even in the midst of action and involvement, prayer should remain a constant source of strength and inspiration. It would be foolish to think that we can be really helpful to others if we lose contact with the wellspring from which our loving service should flow. Involvement can only be Christian when it is the expression of a loving experience of Christ working in us. This is, perhaps, an important lesson we can learn from Charles de Foucauld. Every Christian soldier is at heart a monk; in the middle of the battle there should be room for solitude.

Charles expresses this beautifully in a meditation on Jesus' public life:

"My God, here I am at your feet in my cell. It is night, everything is quiet, everything is sleeping. At this moment I am perhaps the only one in this town at your feet. What have I done to deserve such graces? Now I thank you, and how happy I am! I adore you from the depth of my heart, my God. I adore you with all my soul, and love you with all the strength that is in my heart. I am yours, yours alone. My whole being is yours. . . . Tell me, what was the manner of your public life, my Lord Jesus?"

[Jesus speaks:] "I strove to save men through speech and works of mercy, instead of being satisfied to save them by penance and prayer alone as I had been doing at Nazareth. My zeal for souls became externally apparent. Yet while my life became very public, it still preserved some of the qualities of the solitary life. I often withdrew for the night, or for several whole days in the solitude to prayer. It remained a life of prayer, penance and interior recollection. And apart from the time devoted to preaching the Gospel, it was a life of solitude."¹⁰

Prayer, says Charles, is sometimes accompanied by words—words of adoration; or love; or self-oblation, the giving to God of everything that one has. They can be words of thanksgiving for the goodness of God or for favors received. They may be words of apology in reparation for one's sins. They may be petitions for one's own needs or the needs of others. But prayer can also be without words. In fact, this may be the most perfect prayer if it is an expression of silent love. The greater our commitment to action, the more demanding our involvement in militant causes, the more we stand in need of creating space for such silent union with God.

Prayer is that state in which the soul looks wordlessly on God, solely occupied with contemplating him, telling him with looks that it loves him, while uttering no words, even in thought. . . . While everything is silent and asleep, while everything is drowned in darkness, I

live at the feet of my God, pouring out my heart in love of him, telling him I love him, while he tells me I shall never love him as much as he loves me, however great my love may be. They are hours of incomparable happiness.¹¹