

**Priestly Fraternity Jesus Caritas
Preparing for the canonisation
of Charles de Foucauld**



Text 3: Fundamentals of spirituality
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**FUNDAMENTALS OF A SPIRITUALITY INSPIRED
BY CHARLES DE FOUCAULD**

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Charles de Foucauld "made a journey of transformation until he felt himself the brother of all men and women. [...] He oriented the desire for the total gift of his person to God towards identification with the last, the abandoned, deep in the African desert. » *Fratelli tutti*, 286-287.

The diversity of Charles de Foucauld's spiritual family is impressive. We can find in it all the different states of a Christian life: lay faithful, religious men and women of active or contemplative life, consecrated lay people, priests and bishops. All succeed in drawing a rich and relevant inspiration from Brother Charles's spiritual experience. We often forget the non-Christians and even those who do not have much religious practice but feel inspired by Charles's experience.

The secret to such a spiritual depth and boundlessness is, first of all, faithfulness to the Gospel. The more closely a person's life has been led according to the gospel, the more attractive and relevant it is to all Christians. In addition to this fidelity to the Gospel, Brother Charles went through all the states of Christian life: a lay faithful who lost and rediscovered his faith, a contemplative monk and hermit, a "free" priest, at the same time diocesan and "religious" in his own way, an extraordinary missionary. This depth and diversity of Charles de Foucauld's spiritual experience implies the existence of some basic elements common to all who claim to be part of his spiritual family. Such elements should not be lacking in the spiritual life of anyone who would like to follow Jesus, drawing inspiration from the Foucauldian model.

1. A spirituality of the heart: turning religion into love

First and foremost there is love and mercy. The heart, seat and symbol of love, is the emblem of Brother Charles, the central, distinctive and specific element of his spirituality. Since his conversion, he wanted his heart to become like that of Christ. Throughout his eventful life, he did everything in his power to transform his heart and expand it according to the infinite limits of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. This insatiable love for God and men is the main reason for all the unexpected changes and transformations in his life. In his prayer, he never ceases to call on Jesus to bring his reign of love into the world. We are familiar with Brother Charles's abandonment prayer, but an invocation that came to his lips very often was: "COR JESU

sacratissimum, adveniat Regnum tuum! (Sacred Heart of Jesus, your kingdom come!). He himself liked to say that the foundation of religion and spiritual life is the heart and love. What he wrote in the rule of the congregation he wanted to found is still valid for all those who wish to follow him: "Let us be burning with love like the Heart of Jesus! ... Let us love all men" made to the image of God", like this Heart which so loved men! "... Let us love God, in view of whom we must love men, and whom only we must love for Himself ... Let us love God as the Heart of Jesus loves him, as much as possible! "¹. On the subject of love he was convinced that one should love without limit and no restriction. He said, "Love is perfection; we can exaggerate in everything, except in love: in love we can never go far enough..."².

2. The Eucharist celebrated, adored and lived

We can borrow the consecrated expression of the Second Vatican Council to say that the Eucharist is the source and the summit of all the spiritual experience of Charles de Foucauld. In this spiritual experience, the presence of the Eucharist is fundamental, transversal and inescapable to such an extent that one can say that his life unfolded as a single contemplation and an ever deeper experience of the Eucharist. The Eucharist marked from start to finish everything he lived spiritually: his conversion, his prayer, his relationship with Jesus, the eventful trajectory of his vocation, his pastoral care of goodness, his universal brotherhood, his missionary vision, his presence in the Sahara, every moment of his life, his death...

One could not be a disciple of Brother Charles without an increasingly growing love for Jesus present in the Eucharist celebrated and adored. Despite his great Eucharistic devotion, he never ceased to make resolutions to love the Eucharist more. Like him, we also need to constantly renew our love for the Eucharist. We need to make our own this resolution that he formulated during one of his many spiritual retreats: "To stand at the foot of the holy sacrament whenever the will of God, that is to say a very certain duty, does not force me to move away from it... [...] - Never fail to receive Holy Communion, under any pretext"³.

3. Universal brotherhood

Blessed Charles de Foucauld found in the Eucharist the source of universal brotherhood. Having clearly perceived that every human being is in one way or another, a part, a member of the Eucharistic body of Christ, he deduced from this the need to love all men without distinction: "we must love all men, venerate them, respect them, incomparably since all are members of Jesus, are part of Jesus..."⁴. Considering also that the Eucharist is the sacrament in which the love of God is manifested in a supreme way, he thinks that its reception must make us tender, good and full of love for all men. Pope Francis has just given us Brother Charles as a model of universal brotherhood and friendship in these terms: Charles de Foucauld "made a journey of transformation until he felt himself the brother of all men and women. [...] He oriented the desire for the total gift of his person to God towards identification

¹ C. DE FOUCAULD, *Règlements et directoire*, Nouvelle Cité, Paris 1995, 287.

² C. DE FOUCAULD, *Correspondances sahariennes*, Cerf, Paris 1998, 970.

³ C. DE FOUCAULD, *La dernière place*, Nouvelle Cité, Paris 2002, 95.

⁴ C. DE FOUCAULD, *Petit frère de Jésus*, 84 ; voir aussi *Aux plus petits de mes frères*, 141.

with the last, the abandoned, deep in the African desert. » *Fratelli tutti*, 286-287. An unavoidable and necessary challenge for any disciple of Brother Charles is this transformation into a universal brother, striving ceaselessly to become a universal brother for all men and women.

4. Love of the poorest

For Charles the adoration and tenderness that we have for the Body of Christ during the celebration as well as the adoration of the Eucharist must be the same veneration and the same tenderness for the poor. Brother Charles intuitively understands that every time we say “this is my body, this is my blood”, it is the same Lord who says in the parable of the last judgment, whatever you do to the least of my brothers, you do it unto me. When he made his long expositions of the Blessed Sacrament at Beni Abbes and there was a knock on the door, he left the Tabernacle to go and meet the person who came to visit him. It is the same Christ whom he encountered in the Blessed Sacrament as in the poor who came to visit him. To stay with the poorest, to reach out to the farthest away souls, he accepted huge sacrifices: loneliness, poverty, insecurity, impossibility of celebrating the Eucharist...

5. Sobriety of life: penance, abjection, poverty, sharing

In order to imitate Jesus in his descent to the last place through his incarnation and the sacrifice of the cross, Charles de Foucauld led a life of abjection and intense mortification. Although at times in his life he had to tone down his mortifications, Brother Charles remained a great ascetic throughout his life. Penance and mortification are no longer in order in our spiritual practices and in our consumerist world, but the figure of Brother Charles constantly reminds us of Jesus' invitation to follow him in his descent into our humanity and his sacrifice on the cross. How to claim one's belonging to his spiritual school without a certain dose of penance, or at least of sobriety? We need so much sobriety to row against the tide of consumerism which disfigures so much the beauty of our world and threatens to destroy our mother earth. A spirituality of penance and sobriety constitutes a real antidote against any excessive and abusive use of the goods that divine Providence places at our disposal.

6. Contemplation of the beauty of God in nature

We said above that Charles's life unfolded as a continual contemplation of the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist and in Sacred Scripture. Daily, Charles spent long hours contemplating God, looking at him with love and tenderness in prayer. He was a person always enamored of the splendor and the beauty of the infinite love of God. Despite this intense life of contemplation Charles was not indifferent to nature; he also knew how to find there the splendor of divine beauty. He kept this sense of beauty in creation throughout his life. He said: “Let us admire the beauties of nature, all so beautiful and so good, for they are the work of God. They immediately lead us to admire and praise their author. If nature, man, virtue, if the soul is so beautiful, then how beautiful must be the beauty of one of whom these borrowed beauties are but a pale reflection!. (*Meditation sur les psaumes*, p. 66 ou: *Ch. d. Foucauld, Rencontres à thèmes, Nouvelle Cité 2016. Chapitre: beauté*)

7. Unalterable missionary zeal

Brother Charles' spiritual life was marked by an unfailing missionary zeal. As soon as he discovered his vocation to be a missionary of the Eucharistic banquet for the poorest, the most distant and the most hungry - today we would say the most "peripheral" - he did not stop praying and working for the mission. For the Gospel to be known and proclaimed, he said he was ready to sacrifice everything to "go to the end of the world and live to the last day ..."⁵ Whatever form our state of life takes, can we authentically follow Brother Charles without wanting the Gospel and the Eucharist to be known and loved throughout the world?

To end as we started, let us say once again that with Charles de Foucauld we are in front of an almost inexhaustible spirituality because of its direct connection to the Gospel. We have only outlined some of the basic elements of his spiritual experience. It is up to each one to question the place and extent of these central and fundamental elements in his or her personal spiritual life. Their presence and their deepening can be an indication of the authenticity of our fidelity to the spiritual experience of Brother Charles.

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⁵ C. DE FOUCAULD, *Correspondances sahariennes*, 155.