

PRIESTLY FRATERNITY JESUS CARITAS

International team

Preparing for the canonisation of Charles de Foucauld



texte 5: Dialogue

version: English

22. January 2021

author: Jean-François Berjonneau, France
translation:

DIALOGUE IN THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY OF BROTHER CHARLES

Brother Charles lived sixty years before the Second Vatican Council.

The notion of interreligious dialogue as we understand it today in the Church was totally foreign to him. While having been, I believe, a forerunner of the Council's openness to the universal dimension of the mission of the Church, the process of dialogue between Christian believers and Muslims as such did not fall into its categories. He lived with the theology of his time in the fear of joining Muslims in order to save "these ignorant souls" by bringing them to know Christ.

In addition, he carried out his ministry in a specific socio-political context. France, in those days, extended its colonial empire over a part of Africa. At that time many believed that she was doing civilizing work and that she could provide the education necessary to free the colonized peoples from poverty and ignorance. Brother Charles adhered to this aim. He therefore did not see in the Islam of his time a religion with its own consistency, its history, its diverse streams with some of which Christians could enter into dialogue.

Although Islam had exerted on him, at a certain moment of his life, a certain fascination and though the meeting with the Moslems constituted for him a significant stage on the road of his conversion, he would have been far from subscribing to this conciliar vision of Islam according to which "The Church regards with esteem also the Muslims. They adore the One God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men..." (Nostra Aetate No. 3). He was therefore not situated in the theological problematic of the Second Vatican Council, which recognizes in non-Christian religions the presence of "seeds of the Word" which can constitute a basis for entering into dialogue with believers of another religion.

However, it seems to me that we can nevertheless consider Brother Charles as a precursor of dialogue. Because he instituted with the Muslim populations that he met, in particular with the Tuaregs, a "dialogue of life" which was later presented by the encyclical "Ecclesiam Suam" of Pope Paul VI in 1964 as the fundamental basis of any dialogue: "We cannot save the world from outside; like the Word of God who became man, we must assimilate, to a certain extent, the forms of life of those to whom we want to bring the message of Christ We must share common customs, provided they are human and honest, especially those of the little ones, if we want to be heard and understood. Before even speaking, it is necessary to listen to the voice and even more so to the heart of man ... We must make ourselves the brothers of men ... The climate for dialogue is friendship "N ° 87.

Thus, Brother Charles, by devoting all his energy and a large part of his time to learning the language of the Tuaregs whose life he shared, by developing very simple conversations on the realities of their daily life, by opening up himself to their poetry and thus by trying to understand the genius of this people, was able to open, by the dialogue with its hosts, a climate of confidence to the point where he became for many "a friend". He thus showed that the mission of the Church is also to make up brothers, while respecting differences of culture or religion, as the Church subsequently did in many countries of the planet, based on the openings of the Second Vatican Council.

We can therefore recognize, for the priests of the Jesus Caritas priestly fraternity that we are, that Brother Charles opened to us a spirituality of dialogue which can still inspire us in the encounters we live not only with Muslims but also with all those who do not share our faith. Thus the path of dialogue he opened with the Tuaregs unfolded in several fundamental figures:

He was able to accept being disorientated in order to immerse himself in the other's country. He carried out this movement that Pope Francis calls "a Church going out". He wanted to be welcomed by these people and become as much as possible "one of them". And he made the learning of their language a mystical work because it was for him in the line of the incarnation of Christ in this humanity whom he came to save.

- Although his greatest desire was the conversion of Muslims to the Christian faith, he never exerted any pressure to achieve his ends. He always respected their freedom. In 1908 he recognized that he would not make any conversions and concluded that it was probably not God's will. But he remained in the midst of this Tuareg people in the name of the alliance he had made with them, simply to advance on the path of brotherhood with them.

- His goal: to become the friend of the other

In a letter he addressed to a correspondent, he thus characterized the mode of relationship he wanted to adopt with the Muslims around him: "First, to prepare the ground in silence through kindness, intimate contact, good example; to love them from the bottom of my heart, to be esteemed and loved by them; In this way, to break down prejudices, to gain confidence, to acquire authority - this takes time - then to speak in particular to the best disposed, very cautiously, little by little, variously, giving to each one according to what he is capable of receiving. ". In the absence of being able to explicitly proclaim the Gospel, he personally wanted to become the presence of the Gospel. This is what he meant when he said he wanted to "cry out the Gospel not with words but with all his life". He was able to adjust to the way God looks at the Muslims whom he met. He did not first see them as "infidels" or "disbelievers", but, in his desire to become a universal brother, he considered them "beloved brothers, children of God, souls redeemed by the blood of Jesus, beloved souls of Jesus".

- He manifested the face of a diaconal Church. He not only lived with them, but also contributed, as far as he could, to the improvement of their living conditions and to the development of their country. He fought against slavery, fought disease, introduced medicine, new agricultural techniques and means of communication into this very poor country.

- Whenever he could, he opened a spiritual dialogue with Muslims. Of course he did not adhere to the doctrine of Islam at all. But he recognized in it a point in common with the Christian faith: the double commandment to love God with all your heart and to love your neighbour as yourself. On this basis he developed numerous dialogues with his Muslim friends, showing them in various circumstances how this double command could be deployed in their daily relations.

- Finally, and this is not one of the least elements of dialogue, he made the paschal mystery the royal road to dialogue. As he was constantly contemplating the life of Christ in

Nazareth, like him he took the path of humility, of poverty, of listening and of dying to oneself in meeting the other. Throughout his life he has manifested that "there is no greater love than to give your life for those you love."

By presenting himself as "a pioneer", he showed us that the dialogue of life is an integral part of the mission of the Church.