

Jose Maria RECONDO

The Pathway of Prayer

**in the life and writings of
Rene VOILLAUME**



Preface to the French edition⁺

Fr. Jose Maria Recondo has given us a book that is essential and it is now available in French. It is essential because its information is first hand, its analyses are rich, and no aspect of the great spiritual master Rene Voillaume is neglected. The French translation is due to the Little Brothers of Jesus, a fact that is a strong sign of the authenticity and value of the work. In the years following World War II, the publishing of *Au Coeur des masses*, and then later *Lettres aux Fraternités*, was for many like a direct contact with the innovative force of the Gospel. Fr. Voillaume's writings participated in and were a major witness to the impressive spiritual and missionary movement in the Church of France at that time.

Jose María Recondo not only knows the works of Fr. Voillaume through and through but was also able to meet him and thus directly verify the pertinence of his interpretation. The climate of confidence and friendship he developed with those in charge of the Fraternity allowed him to have access to unpublished documents in the archives.

Diverse factors contributed to the development of Rene Voillaume's spiritual doctrine. We must first of all take into account the formation he received at the seminary in Issy, and then at the *Angelicum* in Rome where, as a young priest, he followed the courses of Fr. Garrigou-Lagrange whose works were decisive in the renewal of religious life. But the most determining factor of all was his discovery of Charles de Foucauld while in the seminary. Rene Voillaume perceived quite quickly that his vocation was to be a disciple of the hermit of the Sahara. We owe to him some of the most trustworthy and insightful commentaries on the writings of Charles de Foucauld. The third determining factor: Fr. Voillaume was the founder of the Congregation of the Little Brothers of Jesus, thus fulfilling a dream of Charles de Foucauld himself. In carrying out this project, there was nothing he could automatically imitate. It was, rather, a question of fidelity to a vital intuition that revealed its potentialities little by little as it took shape. In his responsibility as founder, Fr. Voillaume showed himself surprisingly attentive to God's call in the hearts of individuals as well as to the spiritual queries of his times. Jose Maria Recondo's book allows us to enter into the genesis of this new religious family.

The confrontation between intuition and its development in history constitutes one of the main interests of this book. Very early on, Fr. Voillaume would be called on to spiritually enlighten and collaborate with persons connected by more or less loose bonds to the Fraternity of the Little Brothers: Little Sister Madeleine of Jesus who founded the Little Sisters of Jesus, the foundation of the Little Brothers of the Gospel, and various groups of priests and lay persons desiring to participate in the spirituality of Charles de Foucauld. The field would become increasingly more vast obliging him to adjust what would always remain the same fundamental message.

⁺G. Cardinal COTTIER, Preface to J.M.Recondo, *Le chemin de la prière chez René Voillaume*, Lethielleux (Groupe Parole et Silence), Paris 2010, 7-10.

By virtue of baptism, each person is called to holiness. In a similar way, Fr. Voillaume spoke of a *contemplative dimension of Christian life*. This theme is largely commented on in the last two chapters of the book which constitute a veritable treatise on prayer. The greatest innovation is that, for the Little Brothers and for many, this contemplative dimension of life is no longer lived in the cloister but *in the world*. Because this formula can be easily misunderstood, the author gives all the necessary precisions. Every contemplative life involves separation and a radical rupture with all that is not God, and also requires some preparation on our part. From that comes the significance of *presence* that is proper to this new form of life.

The great intuition of Charles de Foucauld was that he, a disciple, was called to embrace “the humble and obscure existence of God, worker in Nazareth.”

We know that John Paul II, when visiting the Little Sisters, acknowledged the importance of the apostolate of presence, which is a question of giving witness to the reality of God by one’s life, a reality that cannot be expressed in human words.

The deep reason for devotion to the Sacred Heart can be understood similarly. Fr. Voillaume wrote that “Human beings are too close to the Heart of Jesus for their physical and moral sufferings not to resound deeply within it. Thus we will also feel all those sufferings in ourselves.” It is not at all a question here of a compassion purely on the level of one’s feelings. Communion with the mystery of Christ consists in the priceless peace and joy which always flooded the heart and soul of the incarnate Word. From this comes the necessity of a very pure union with Jesus: only the Eucharistic life little by little lifts all the worries, fatigue, and suffering of contact with human beings to the reality of a participation in the mystery of the Cross. Fr. Voillaume went on to write, “The whole life of Charles de Foucauld was consecrated to the Heart of Christ as the only place where the two movements of love, love of God and love of others, come together, even though they seem so divergent in the conditions surrounding their concrete realization. For what moves us to love God can move us to the point of even separating ourselves from the created, and what moves us to love other persons can move us to be totally present to their day to day earthly tasks.”

Jose Maria Recondo’s excellent study allows us to penetrate the intuition of Charles de Foucauld more deeply, as it is explained by Rene Voillaume. It is a plunging into the living springs of the Gospel and the depths of the love of God and neighbor.

+ Cardinal Georges Cottier, OP*

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Introduction

The importance of *spiritual persons* is revealed by the contribution they bring, through their witness and teaching, to the spiritual *life* of the men and women of their times as well as those of the future. The history of the Church is rich in saints and spiritual persons who have shed light on the route to follow as members of the People of God, not from their intellectual penetration of the Christian mystery, which is proper to theologians, but by their particular *experience* of this mystery.

This is the case of Charles de Foucauld and those in the large spiritual family which draws its inspiration from him. This caused Paul VI to observe that their experience “seems to mark an act of Providence in the history of the Church because it is particularly in tune with the needs and inspirations of today’s world.”¹ The experience of the Fraternities of the Little Brothers and Little Sisters of Jesus has been, without a doubt, at the root of the vast influence achieved by the spiritual message of Brother Charles of Jesus.

As founder of the Little Brothers of Jesus and thus a primary actor in this experience, it was Fr. Voillaume who expressed and clarified it through his writings and conferences at the very moment it took off. The translation of his works into nineteen different languages allows one to guess the influence and attraction of his teachings. Another witness also is the fact that so many “men and women in the most diverse states of life and situations have found the answers to their deepest concerns in this message.”² In fact, many people, on reading the works of Rene Voillaume, “have had many things clarified which were confusing them.”³

Because he reflected and expressed the experience of a contemplative life lived *in the midst of the masses*, many lay people, priests, and religious discovered in the teachings of Fr. Voillaume an echo that fit their aspirations and *actual possibilities* of prayer. Because, “fundamentally, contemplation is not just given to Carthusians, Poor Clares, and Carmelites, etc. It is frequently the treasure of persons hidden from the eyes of the world [...]. The great need of our times in what concerns the spiritual life is to take contemplation out into the streets and onto the roads of the world [...]. We believe that the vocation of these Little Brothers of Charles de Foucauld, these contemplatives, tossed as they are into the world and its miseries, will be very meaningful in this regard and that we can expect new insights from them in the domain of the spiritual life.”⁴

These reflections of Jacques and Raissa Maritain refer to “those living what we would call the ordinary life of a good Christian in the world,” with all that entails, “who are ready to go

¹ Paul VI, Letter to Bishop Mercier, 1/12/66, “Jesus-Caritas” n°145, 1967, p.114.

² C. CASTRO CUBELLS, prologue to the Spanish edition of *Lettres aux Fraternités/I*, p. XIX – XX.

³ J. GOMIS, *Vida y corrientes en la espiritualidad contemporánea* in “Historia de la espiritualidad”, 2, Barcelona, 1969, p.562.

⁴ J and R MARITAIN, *Liturgie et Contemplation* in *Œuvres complètes XIV*, Éditions universitaires, Fribourg, Switzerland/ Éditions Saint-Paul, 1992, p.975.

further, their hearts burning with the desire to go further, but find themselves unable to because of numerous and more or less illusory fears and obstacles.”⁵

We are quite convinced that the experience of the fraternities, shared, clarified and expressed by Rene Voillaume, has much to say to the men and women of our times.

One of the themes that Fr. Voillaume developed the most in his writings and conferences is that of prayer, even if he didn't pretend to be formulating a systematic doctrine of prayer. As we will see, he especially centered his attention on the contemplative search for God in the concrete and complex conditions that a person experiences in this day and age at the beginning of his or her journey on the *path of prayer*. We will find this treated, on the one hand, in the teachings and directives he gave to the Little Brothers (and Little Sisters) of Jesus on the contemplative life of their fraternities and communities; and on the other hand, in the rich collection of teachings he gave about the life of prayer of all baptized persons, no matter their state of life or vocation.

Why did I decide to study the teachings of Rene Voillaume on prayer? First of all, as I noted, because of the influence his writings have had on men and women of our times; but also because, for my own life of prayer, I myself have profited from the insights that come with the reading of his works. That's why, in 1980, I began my research on this theme, the fruit of which became the thesis for my licentiate of sacred theology in 1983. The written correspondence I was able to establish with Fr. Voillaume during that time was very helpful to me for a better understanding of his work.

But even more important for me was being able to meet him in Paris in July 1985 – in view of a work I wanted to embark on for my Doctorate in Theology. Then I also met up with him the following March in Toulouse. It was in Paris that he suggested I read *El-Abiodh-Sidi-Cheikh*,⁶ the work he himself had just finished writing on the history of the fraternities, with its clearly autobiographical implications. Reading, taking notes, and synthesizing its ten books (contained in 15 volumes) took me a few months, during which I lived with the Little Brothers of Jesus at Rangueil (Toulouse) – where, I must mention in passing, Jacques Maritain lived for the last thirteen years of his life. The confidential character of this work of Fr. Voillaume - written solely for the internal use of the Congregation - and the fact that only a few copies had been printed, motivated my prolonged stay with the Little Brothers, a very profitable stay.

Becoming familiar with this document, in fact, radically changed the direction of my research, opening up for me a panorama I had ignored until then. The fact of knowing the personal story of Fr. Voillaume – as well as that of the Little Brothers of Jesus – allowed me to situate his thinking within a context of greater historical accuracy and at the heart of his rich experience of life.

Living and dialoguing with several of the Little Brothers at the fraternity of Rangueil was equally providential for the research I was beginning. These brothers had played an important role in the history of the congregation: Brothers Andre (who was part of the founding group), Rene Page (Rene Voillaume's successor in the governing of the fraternities), and Michel Nurdin (the theologian he used to consult). That gave me the possibility of a different access to the

⁵ J. MARITAIN, *Le paysan de la Garonne*, in *Œuvres complètes XII*, Éditions universitaires, Fribourg, Switzerland/Éditions Saint-Paul Paris, 1992, p.975.

⁶ Rene VOILLAUME, *El-Abiodh-Sidi-Cheikh. Histoire des origines de la Fraternité des Petits Frères de Jésus*, 10 books (15 volumes), duplicated edition, Tre Fontane (Rome) 1982. [In future references to this work of Fr Voillaume, it will be referred to simply as *Histoire* followed by the number of the book.]

author I was wanting to study and to the history of the Fraternity, and it gave me another type of approach than that I had known up until then.

As I just mentioned, the origin of this book is the research carried out for obtaining a Doctorate in Theology. I have tried to strip it of all erudite language to make the reading of it clearer and more flowing. Obviously that implied a substantial “pruning” of the technical terms that accompanied the research in its beginnings.

The body of the book is made up of four chapters. I wanted to begin with an historical introduction whose starting point would be Charles de Foucauld’s vocation, ideal, and foundation projects. These were the very soil in which the contemplative vocation of Fr. Voillaume was rooted and the backdrop for the development of his reflection on the subject of prayer. Then, I wanted to go through the different stages of Rene Voillaume’s life in which, little by little, we can see the actual physiognomy of the fraternities being sketched out. This should help for a more accurate comprehension of Fr. Voillaume’s teaching, situating it in its context and at the heart of a story whose very fruit is this teaching.

The brief second chapter entitled “*Rene Voillaume’s Teachings about Prayer and those to whom they were addressed*,” in some ways continues the first chapter, but more directly from the standpoint of the historical conditions that marked the *work* of Rene Voillaume in regards to our theme. This will allow us to understand why chapters three and four treat, respectively, *The Contemplative Life of the Fraternities* and *The Contemplative Dimension of Christian Life*. These last two chapters present in turn the teachings on prayer given by Rene Voillaume, on the one hand, to the Little Brothers of Jesus in the specific and particular context of their contemplative vocation, and on the other, to a greater and more diverse audience that also received the call to develop the contemplative dimension of Christian life.

Before ending I would especially like to thank my friend Brother Michel Nurdin because it is to his constant assistance and his insights that I owe, in large part, the fruits of my work. Thank you also to D. Jose Maria Iraburu for his kind counseling and advice and to Brothers Jacinto Uzenat and Marc Hayet who generously provided the translation of the text [from Spanish to French].

Chapter I

THE HISTORICAL BACKDROP

A person's personal story plays a decisive role in the development of his or her spiritual experience and is far from being a stranger to it. For this reason, with due regard to the secret part of the mystery of God's action in hearts, prior knowledge of certain historical facts that marked the religious life of Fr. Voillaume will allow us a better understanding of what he formulated about prayer through the years.

Since Rene Voillaume was a Little Brother of Jesus, and even more than that, the founder in the eyes of the Church of this Congregation that follows in the footsteps of Charles de Foucauld, we will begin by giving a synthesis of the ideal and mission to which Brother Charles of Jesus felt called during this life and which he left as a heritage to his spiritual descendants.

1 – Charles de Foucauld Vocation, Ideal, and Foundation Projects

Brother Charles of Jesus died in Tamanrasset on December 1, 1916. He had desired in vain for someone to come and join him in order to continue to “cry the Gospel by his life.”⁷ Nevertheless, his way of living and his writings became his heritage like a fertile seed.

Vocation, ideal, and mission

Charles de Foucauld was born in Strasbourg on September 15, 1858. Ever since his conversion in 1886, he never stopped searching for the path by which he could carry out his religious vocation. But it was only little by little that things became clear to him.

“As soon as I believed there was a God, I understood that I could do nothing else than to live for him alone. My religious vocation dates from the moment I believed. God is so great! There is such a difference between God and all that is not God! [...] I wanted to be a religious and to live for God alone, to do whatever was most perfect to do, no matter what. My confessor made me wait for three years. As for me [...] I didn't know which Order to choose. The Gospel showed me that ‘the first commandment is to love God with one's whole heart’ and that everything should be wrapped in love. Everyone knows that the first effect of love is imitation. Therefore, I had only to enter the Order where I found the most exact imitation of Jesus. I didn't feel made to imitate his public life of preaching. Therefore, I felt I should imitate the hidden life of the humble and poor workman of Nazareth. It seemed to me that none offered this life better than the Trappist Order.”⁸

This text admirably summarizes the intuitions that accompanied him and that he deepened throughout his whole life, for with the passing years and through “a journey of unpredictable stages, his spiritual vocation always remained the same.”⁹

⁷ Charles de FOUCAULD, *Écrits spirituels*, Paris 1947, p. 121.

⁸ Charles de FOUCAULD, *Lettres à Henry de Castries*, Paris 1938, p. 96-97

⁹ RV, Introduction to G. Gorrée, *Charles de Foucauld. Album du centenaire*, Lyon 1957, no page numbers. [References to the works of Rene Voillaume will be indicated from now on by the initials RV.]

It was, in fact, at the Trappists (1890-1897) that he made his first attempts at carrying out his vocation. But, after several years of Cistercian life, he noticed that he was not finding there all the austerity and abjection he was seeking in the line of his vocation to “the life of Nazareth.” Thus, already in 1893, he wrote to his spiritual director, Fr. Huvelin, that he was wondering about the possibility of forming a little Congregation. After a long and obedient wait and just a few days before he was to pronounce his final vows, he received the dispensation from the Father General to leave the Trappists and consecrate himself to carrying out the ideal to which he felt called.

He left then for the Holy Land where he lived for three years working for the Poor Clares of Nazareth (1897-1899) and of Jerusalem (1899-1900), dividing his time between manual work, reading, and prayer. He consecrated whole days to prayer and meditation of the Gospel. This period was like a long retreat for him and the novitiate for his future spiritual life.

He began to consider the possibility of an eremitic foundation on the Mount of Beatitudes. That is why he returned to France to prepare for priestly ordination which he received on June 9, 1901.

During the preparatory retreats for the diaconate and priesthood, he discovered that he was not to lead this “life of Nazareth” in the Holy Land, as he was thinking to be his vocation, but among the most abandoned sheep.

In his youth he had traveled all around Algeria and Morocco. No group of people seemed more abandoned to him than the people there. He settled, therefore, in Beni-Abbes, in the southern Oran province of Algeria. His life there took on a different tonality. If it is true that he did not go out of his hermitage, it was nonetheless open to all. His ideal in those days was “not a large and rich monastery, not agricultural exploitation, but a sort of humble little hermitage where a few poor monks could live on some fruit and a little barley harvested by their own hands. There would be a small enclosure and penance and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. They would not go out of their enclosure nor preach but offer hospitality to all who would come, good or bad, friend or enemy, Muslim or Christian. It was evangelization not by word but by the presence of the Most Blessed Sacrament, the offering of the Divine Sacrifice, prayer, penance, practice of the evangelical virtues, and charity – fraternal and universal charity.”¹⁰

Beni-Abbes (1901-1905), therefore, represented a first realization of his ideal. Brother Charles was seeking to find a balance between his contemplative monastic life and his desire to radiate the love of Christ among the local populations surrounding him. But it would only be in Tamanrasset (1905-1916) that he would find the full development of his vocation. He built his hut not far from the hamlet and not only did he not flee the inhabitants of the region but, on the contrary, went out to them, looked for contact with them, and visited them. He was always at the service of his neighbors and his visitors. He was the friend you could contact at any hour of the day or night. He did everything he could to insert himself into the region of the Hoggar. He already saw clearly that his vocation was a vocation of presence in the middle of people, a presence that would be a transparent witness of the love of Christ.

We thus have before us an authentic contemplative vocation, nourished by meditation of the Gospel and centered on adoration of the mystery of the Eucharist– the true heart of the “little Nazareth”– and, at the same time, an apostolic charity at the service of the salvation of his neighbors, expressed neither through preaching nor organized works but by a respectful friendship, hospitality, and goodness which would radiate the love of Christ for all humankind. This second element is the one that took the most time to grow to maturity. It wasn’t until the

¹⁰ Charles de FOUCAULD, *Lettres à Henry de Castries*, Paris 1938, p. 84.

last years of his life that it would find its most accurate expression. Thus, while seeking a life of contemplative intimacy with the Lord, he did not separate himself physically from people, especially the poor. In his eyes, this was how Jesus of Nazareth lived: a silent, recollected, poor life of work, which at the same time was open and completely accessible to all the folks of his village and to all his people.

Charles de Foucauld, founder

Brother Charles lived his religious life dreaming to gather a few brothers around him to share his life. This project was formulated during his third year as a Trappist, but he never saw it take shape during his lifetime. He accepted the apparent failure of this desire as a consequence of his unworthiness.

In 1893 he sent a letter to Father Huvelin with his first rough sketch of the religious ideal he felt called to live. In June 1896 he composed a short Rule for the members of the Congregation he wanted to found, the “Little Brothers of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.”

During his stay in Palestine, the abbess of the Poor Clares in Jerusalem used all her influence to help him revive his projects. In 1899, he drew up a Rule for the “Hermits of the Sacred Heart,” in which a new element appeared: an accent on priesthood and the apostolate. The “life of Nazareth” thus appeared as both recollected and open, a place of intimacy with Jesus and a place of departure on mission. Two years later, a better awareness of the demands of universal love implied in the priesthood led him to go back to the name “Little Brothers of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.”

In 1902 he drew up the Rule for the “Little Sisters of the Sacred Heart.”

During the last years of his life, faced with the failure of his first projects, he envisioned a kind of lay missionary who would settle among non-Christians in order to attract them to the faith by their example and their goodness, thus supporting the tasks of consecrated missionaries. This project dated from 1909. With this goal in mind, he launched a “Union of Brothers and Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus” and wrote a *Directory* for them. At the time of his death, the Union counted 49 members. These were the only visible descendants of the ideal that he left behind. In 1924 they became known as the “Charles de Foucauld Association,” from which the “Charles de Foucauld Fraternity” was born in 1949.

Finally, and for the last time, on May 13, 1911, he wrote an important letter in which he traced the main lines of the ideal of the fraternities.¹¹

This short presentation of the life, the ideal, and the projects of foundation of Charles de Foucauld will help us later on to understand how the Little Brothers of Jesus understood their religious vocation and the path they followed throughout the years in search of a greater fidelity to the charism they received.

¹¹ cf. Ch. de FOUCAULD, *Lettres à mes frères de la Trappe*, Paris 1969, p. 273-276.

Here it is necessary to point out, however, that even if Charles de Foucauld was the true inspiration of the foundation of the Little Brothers of Jesus, he cannot be considered the founder strictly speaking, in the way that the Church usually uses this term (cf. RV, *Les Fraternités du Père de Foucauld. Mission et esprit*, Cerf, Paris 1946, p.13-14), because “in the history of religious foundations, he is the only one to have given birth to his congregations through his death” (RV, in *Petits Frères de Jésus, Chapitre Général 1966, Compte-rendu 6 septembre 1966*, p. 2).

2 – How the Ideal of Charles de Foucauld Took Shape Historically in the Lives of the Little Brothers of Jesus

Rene Voillaume

The unfolding of his vocation

Father Voillaume was born on July 19, 1905, in Versailles, into a well-to-do family but whose life style was austere. He lived in Versailles until he was 9 years old and made his First Communion and Confirmation there. Afterwards, during the war of 1914-1918, he lived in La Bourboule.

He was a rather solitary child, introverted and not very communicative, with an unmistakable taste for reading. As he himself was aware, his Alsace and Lorraine origins shaped his temperament: “We [my brothers, sisters and I] were outwardly not very communicative, shy, and rather withdrawn, as people from Lorraine often tend to be, while interiorly we were sensitive and emotional, but without showing it. I suffered from that all my life.”¹²

He had a clear inclination towards the sciences and a particular liking for physics and mechanics, all he needed for becoming an engineer – his “first vocation” – and the family atmosphere fostered this orientation as it was the profession of his father and his uncles. His interest in science was a characteristic trait of his adolescence and youth as was his religiosity, nourished from childhood by a special devotion to the Eucharist.

He felt his first calls to the priesthood during his childhood, but these were put to sleep right away by his passion for the sciences. They were confirmed, however, by something mysterious that happened when he was 16, which he himself referred to as a “mystical grace.” From that time on, he devoted more time to prayer and to his life of union with God, expressed mainly in devotion to the Sacred Heart and the Blessed Sacrament.

At the same time as this call to the priesthood, he also felt the call to be a missionary. Africa especially attracted him, which is perhaps understandable because of the fact that his oldest sister, Marguerite, entered the Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Africa (the “White Sisters”) in 1921.

This attraction, however, was not clear enough for him to determine the choice of a congregation, so he was advised to enter the Seminary of Saint Sulpice in Issy les Moulineaux, near Paris, to allow his decision to mature while receiving theological and spiritual formation. He entered there in 1923 and completed two years of philosophy. Then he left for the novitiate of the White Fathers at Maison Carree, a suburb of Algiers. But he only stayed with them for a year. His frail health did not allow him to live in Africa. So, he returned to the seminary in Issy with the hope of returning to the White Fathers at the end of his studies, if his health improved.

At the end of 1927 another mysterious occurrence had a decisive influence on his life. A kind of mystical experience or ecstasy, repeated over several months, confirmed the contemplative nature of his vocation.

¹² RV, *Histoire 1*, p. 24.

In the footsteps of Charles de Foucauld

It seems fitting to go back a bit to the autumn of 1921 when Rene Bazin's book about Charles de Foucauld was published. Although Rene Voillaume was only 16 when he read it, he was deeply moved by it. He found a providential echo of his missionary and contemplative aspirations in the life of Brother Charles of Jesus. But he knew that his frail health prohibited him from dreaming of imitating such a life. And so he entered Issy, seeking to clarify his vocation. When he later entered the White Fathers, he was well aware that it was the only path that could lead to a life analogous to that of Charles de Foucauld, if God so willed.

While he was at Maison Carree, he received a letter from a seminarian in Issy confiding his attraction to the ideal of Charles de Foucauld. On his return to the seminary, he got to know others who shared the same aspirations. So, they formed a group which, several years later, became the basis of the foundation in El Abiodh.

They got hold of Charles de Foucauld's manuscript containing the Rule of 1899 and began to study it with the intention of drawing up a foundation plan based on it.

Rene Voillaume, who had been chosen to head the group, was ordained a priest on June 29, 1929. He spent the following two years in Rome pursuing a doctorate in theology under the direction of Fr. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange.

After the group had undertaken the needed language preparation for such an enterprise and after a period abounding in contacts, encounters, and research, they took the habit at the Basilica of Montmartre in Paris on September 8, 1933, and then set themselves up in the little oasis of El-Abiodh-Sidi-Cheikh, situated in the southern Oran region of the Sahara. The group consisted of five priests: Rene Voillaume, Marcel Bouchet, Marc Gerin, Guy Champenois and Georges Gorree, all former Issy students. There was one more person in the founding group. Up until then he had had a path quite different from the rest of the group, but from then on he followed the same vocation. He was a convert, a disciple and friend of Jacques Maritain. Not wanting to make his name known for personal reasons linked to his past, he became known from then on as "Brother Andre" (1904-1986). Later, when his studies in Islamology and comparative mysticism began to be published, they appeared under the pseudonym of "Louis Gardet."

The fraternity of El-Abiodh-Sidi-Cheikh

Basing their life on the rule of 1899 and adapting several points to fit their circumstances, the Little Brothers of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, as they were called at that time (or the "Brothers of Solitude" as the Arabs called them), began their religious adventure on Islamic soil in a clearly monastic life. There was a Carmelite and Carthusian influence that was significant at this stage.

All of them had been familiar with Carmelite spirituality before the foundation. In the seminary, they were formed in prayer with the masters St John of the Cross and St Theresa of Avila, as well as St Theresa of the Child Jesus. And once they were in El-Abiodh, their knowledge of the Carmelite "deserts" had an unquestionable influence on the decision to provide equilibrium to their communal life by periods of eremitical life.

During the preparatory stage, before their installation in the desert, they had frequent contact with the Carthusians of Montrieux. Then, in the first years after the foundation, the relationship became even closer, to such a degree that the Carthusians there became their advisers and agreed to form the brother that would become the first novice master of the Little Brothers.

That did not prevent the Fraternity from having its own physiognomy and from developing along its own lines. It is very enlightening to read what Br. Andre wrote in 1936 about this very point, commenting, on behalf of the Little Brothers, on the Constitutions which had just been drafted:

“It can be said that the contemplative truly has charge of each soul in the universe. Nothing is excluded in a prayer which must be the very same prayer that the Incarnate Word, through his holy humanity, never ceases lifting up to the Father and which continues in us.

For a Little Brother of the Sacred Heart, there is a more particular mission added to the universality of this intercession. Indeed, he is not satisfied with just praying for the unbelievers around him. He becomes one of them, living in solidarity with them. On the day of his profession he asks God to accept this substitution, this spiritual *naturalization*, so that, in front of God, he may be truly the older brother of the unbelievers among whom he has been sent, the ‘first-born’ Christian among them, their surety by right of spiritual consanguinity. [...] Such a vocation can only be understood in the perspective of the doctrine of the Mystical Body. [...] The Little Brothers of the Sacred Heart have the deep conviction that the essence of their vocation lies in this role of intercession.

Jesus offers them the sufferings of his Crucified Heart as an inexhaustible treasury of grace, and by means of the same, asks them to assume before God the peoples to whom they have been sent. [...] It is thus in the Blood of Christ that they will become their guarantor, their surety, and brothers of the same race.”¹³

Their effort at *adaptation* and the significant place that the Eucharistic mystery occupies in their lives were noted by Br. Andre as among the most characteristic traits of their identity as Little Brothers:

“This silent mission normally opens up into a kind of adaptation in which their unbelieving brothers and they become truly one. They become brothers by race, not just through language, culture, customs, and religious art, but even more deeply by all that these exterior signs carry with them, a true adaptation of soul in the love of Christ [...].

For the Little Brothers of the Sacred Heart, the Eucharist is the only means, model, and reason for their lives. The veneration of the Eucharistic sacrifice is concretized by the place given to the Mass in the life of the Little Brothers and to the hours of adoration of the Most Blessed Sacrament exposed. And their adoration is entirely dependent on the very act of the Sacrifice [...]. For them, the life they must carry to their unbelieving brothers is to be ‘Saviors with Jesus,’ Priest, and, with him, host and victim. The Eucharist is like the supreme witness of the divine glory among humankind. In the Communion of Saints and the plenitude of the Mystical Body, the Little Brothers must make themselves food for souls, as Jesus did, and, like Jesus, let themselves be devoured by souls, in the silence of the oblation, making themselves ‘all things to all people’ as both contemplatives and missionaries.”¹⁴

For more than ten years, these characteristic traits of the Fraternity were translated into an authentically monastic form of life. The classic observances of cloister, silence, and day and night prayer constituted the essentials of their exterior witness in regards to their relationship with the Muslim population as well as with the Christians with whom they were spiritually linked or who came to the fraternity to make a retreat. For them, these observances constituted

¹³ X.Z. (the article was signed in this way), *Les Frères de la Solitude*, in the revue “Contemplation et Apostolat”, Abbaye St-André, Lophem-lez-Bruges, 1, 1936, p. 256-258.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 258-259.

the very fabric of daily life. They didn't confuse them with the essentials but considered them to be the body in which the essentials were incarnated.

This monastic character, taken on by the Fraternity ever since the foundation, is linked to the conception Charles de Foucauld had of his congregation during his stay in the Holy Land. It was there that he wrote what was known as the Rule of 1899 on which the Little Brothers chose to base their foundation in the beginning.

The years of war and dispersion: deepening the identity of the Fraternity

The arrival of World War II modified the life of the Fraternity by the fact that the majority of the Little Brothers were mobilized. A few, however, were able to stay in El-Abiodh, offering the others the possibility of returning there periodically; but even so, the life of the community entered into a kind of long interval that lasted until the end of the war.

Rene Voillaume was assigned to Oran, and then Touggourt, as noncombatant military personnel. That kept him at some distance from the physical direction of the community in El-Abiodh for several years.

Thus began a period during which diverse circumstances and providential occurrences led the Fraternity to a transformation that could not have been foreseen.

We must begin by recalling that the Rule of 1899, on which the foundation was based, had been modified in several areas because certain Superiors at Saint Sulpice had considered it impracticable and "written not for men but for angels."¹⁵

That explains why, except for the founding group, the rest of the Little Brothers had no direct knowledge of this rule. Moreover, they expressly avoided having it fall into the hands of the younger brothers so as to preserve them from dangerous illusions.

But during the war, the brothers who had remained in El-Abiodh became acquainted with the original Rule. Thus, in May 1943, they submitted to Rene Voillaume their firm desire to go back to a more perfect observance of the Rule of 1899 in order to follow Brother Charles of Jesus with greater fidelity. Basically that meant a life of greater poverty and austerity (they especially reacted against the physical size of the monastery they were living in), a stricter respect for the cloister and silence, a more important place given to work, and greater simplicity in relations among themselves.

The question was posed in a clear and radical way. It was due to the openness and patience of Fr. Voillaume as well as to the intervention of Bishop Mercier, the Apostolic Prefect of the Sahara, that they were able to get past this crisis.

These demands for greater fidelity found an echo and favorable welcome in Rene Voillaume. While the life in El-Abiodh evolved in that direction, he withdrew to the hermitage of Djebel-Aïssa in June 1944 and began a time of research in order to penetrate more deeply into the spirit of Brother Charles of Jesus. This work took him an entire year and led him to read the writings of Charles de Foucauld (including the unpublished works, to which he had access thanks to the Postulation for the Cause of Beatification). It also led him to an exchange of views with the Little Brothers and a time of prayerful reflection.

"Above all, we feel the need to once again put ourselves in contact with the spirit of Charles de Foucauld and the whole of his life, something we neglected to do after that initial moment of choosing Brother Charles' 1899 constitutions and rule as the basis of our foundation. We are still holding onto that rule of 1899 because of its clear definition of a contemplative

¹⁵ cf. RV, *Histoire I*, p. 268.

missionary vocation, but we would like not only to re-read it in the light of the spirituality of Charles de Foucauld and his conception of the life of Jesus of Nazareth, but also to rethink the concrete way in which we have expressed this ideal. It was in this line, and free of all tendency to a literal interpretation, that I set to work.”¹⁶

Rene Voillaume thus expressed, in a few lines, the basis on which the Fraternity would evolve from then on and the principle which would make possible the future openness of its mission. The Rule of 1899 only partially represented the thinking of Brother Charles which, in many aspects, was still like a seed that had not yet germinated. The Little Brothers no longer sought to define their vocation and mission solely in reference to it but rather in reference to the totality of the life and writings of Charles de Foucauld, which would assure a greater fidelity to the whole of his message.

As fruit of this period of research and reflection, Rene Voillaume wrote some two hundred pages that he entitled *La mission providentielle du Père Charles de Foucauld et la réalisation de ses projets de fondation* (*The Providential Mission of Father Charles de Foucauld and the Realization of his Plans for Foundation*), with *Étude sur l'esprit et le règlement des Fraternités* (*A Study of the Spirit and the Rule of the Fraternities*) as subtitle.

It seems opportune to stress the decisive role played by *Br. Noël*, later known by the name of *Milad*, one of the Little Brothers who remained in El Abiodh during the war and was touched by the Gospel radicalism of Charles de Foucauld. Br. Milad gave a good boost to the transformation of the Fraternity in the direction of a greater purity of the ideal, and shortly afterwards was named novice master. It was he who formed the Little Brothers during the years when vocations were flourishing in great numbers. It is good to mention him in particular, both for the important role he played in the period we have just mentioned, which was really decisive for the future direction of the Fraternity, and for his role as a formator in the Congregation.¹⁷

Thus, the crisis that began in 1943 came to an end, and the Fraternity, having deepened its ideal, came out of it more firmly rooted in the spirit of Charles de Foucauld. According to Rene Voillaume, what had been lacking was “a sufficient presence of the soul and spirit of Charles de Foucauld – a certain sense of poverty and work – a deeper understanding of the mystery of the hidden life of Nazareth.”¹⁸

From Islam to the working world: the mission of the Fraternity expands

If the war years were a providential occasion for the Fraternity to confirm itself in its own proper spirit, the immediate post-war period was of no less importance in defining its future orientation.

A little after the end of the war, Fr. Voillaume undertook a trip to France (1945) which was followed by another to Rome and to France between April and July 1946. Both were decisive for the future of the Fraternity.

We need to point out that, during the war, Br. Andre stayed with the White Fathers at Maison-Carree for health reasons.

¹⁶ RV, *Histoire* 8, p. 126.

¹⁷ Onesime Retailleau entered the Fraternity in 1935. He had a sister who was a religious and they exchanged names: she became Sister Onesime and he took the name of Brother Noël. This name, translated into Arab, became “Milad Aïssa” which means “the birth of Jesus.” Using the name “A Little Brother of Jesus”, he was the author of *Ce que croyait Charles de Foucauld*, Tours, 1971.

¹⁸ RV, *La mission providentielle du Père Charles de Foucauld et la réalisation de ses projets de fondation*, cited in “Les Petits Frères de Jésus - Nouvelles des Fraternités”, 1983, N^{os} 95-96, p. 21.

So, before going to France in 1945, Rene Voillaume went to see Br. Andre. Thanks to him he got to know some Christian worker activists in Algiers with whom Br. Andre had been in contact during the previous years. After having met them, they began to entertain the possibility of a presence among workers. The trip to France which followed and the contacts he made there at that time confirmed Rene Voillaume in this idea, and he announced it to the Little Brothers on his return to El Abiodh in December of the same year.

That is how the new Constitutions, drawn up at that time and approved in 1947, came to consider that the mission of the Fraternity should be oriented not only to the world of Islam but also to all mission territories (this was faithful to the thinking of Charles de Foucauld). And among these they included also the world of dechristianized workers. They emphasized the importance of work, even though they did not yet envision salaried work outside of the fraternity. At that time even the worker fraternity was still thought of in monastic terms, even though they envisaged it as inserted into the working class environment, creating relationships and adapting itself to that milieu. It was also at that time that the brothers changed their name. Another congregation with the same name already existed, so from then on they called themselves the "Little Brothers of Jesus."

Among the people that Rene Voillaume met in France and who confirmed him in the project of worker fraternities, a special mention must be made of Little Sister Magdeleine of Jesus, foundress of the Little Sisters of Jesus, with whom he had already been in touch on a regular basis at that time, and who was orienting the mission of her congregation in the same direction.¹⁹ They had met for the first time in El Golea in 1938 at the tomb of Charles de Foucauld. There was always a deep communion between them in the way of conceiving the ideal of their fraternities and communities, and it is not easy to distinguish the respective influences as they were mutual.

Rene Voillaume maintained elsewhere that "the period from March to October 1946 was an extraordinarily productive period for the fraternities, rich in events and in decisions that contributed to giving the Little Brothers, as well as the Little Sisters of Jesus, their definitive character."²⁰

The most important element of this period was without a doubt the trip that Father Voillaume made with Br. Andre between April and June of that year. The principal objective of this trip was to organize a study fraternity in Rome. Br. Andre accompanied Fr. Voillaume to advise him in this area and in order to meet up with his friend Jacques Maritain who was in Rome as the French ambassador to the Holy See and whom he had not seen for 13 years. During this time, Milad remained in charge of El-Abiodh.

The first noteworthy fact is the meeting they had with the leaders of the YCW (Young Christian Workers Movement) in Algiers before leaving for Europe. From their conversation the idea emerged of a worker fraternity with salaried work outside of the fraternity. It was the Young Christian Workers, in fact, who objected to the initial project of independent craft work, emphasizing the risk of winding up at the head of small businesses like other orders or religious congregations.

¹⁹ Elisabeth Hutin, in religion Little Sister Magdeleine of Jesus, desiring to follow the way traced by Brother Charles of Jesus, left for North Africa in 1936 with one companion (Anne Cadoret). They were in Boghari until 1938 where their experience was more of helping the local population. After that and a year of novitiate with the White Sisters in Birmandreis (Algeria), they left for the Sahara at the explicit request of the Apostolic Prefect, Bishop Nouet. The first community was founded in 1939 in Touggourt. In 1946, a few months before the Little Brothers of Jesus, they founded the first "worker fraternity/community" in Aix-en-Provence. With the passing years, they grew quite rapidly and made foundations throughout the whole world.

²⁰ RV, *Histoire* 9, p. 21

That is how the idea of salaried work outside of the fraternity came to birth, united to the desire for a real and tangible poverty. But it must be kept in mind that at no time was the contemplative nature of the fraternities put in question.

However, this was not always understood by those in France who shared the brothers' preoccupation with the evangelization of the working world, among them the priests of the "Mission de Paris." On the contrary, they felt deeply understood by Jacques Loew and his team, by Father Guerin, and by Marguerite Taride,²¹ each of whom figured among the numerous contacts they had during this trip.

In Rome, Br. Andre got together with Jacques and Raïssa Maritain a good number of times. Rene Voillaume also had the opportunity to be with them. We shall take a moment now to look at the special bond that existed between Jacques and Raïssa Maritain and the Fraternity.

There was total agreement between them on the subject of the possibility and the importance of a contemplative life *in the world* – "contemplation on the roads," to go back to Raïssa's well-known expression. This seems to indicate that the Maritains were not strangers, even without having sought it, to the way of life that the fraternities adopted from 1947 onwards. Moreover, it must not be forgotten that they had themselves gone deeply into this theme long before the Little Brothers abandoned the cloistered lifestyle of El-Abiodh.

According to what we discussed with him, we believe that Rene Voillaume would have accepted only partially the assertion just made.²²

However, in his preface to *Raïssa's Journal*, in which he was commenting on a text written by her in 1919, he himself expressed the following:

"I said earlier that Raïssa was fully conscious of her vocation of contemplation in the world. 'It is a mistake,' she wrote, 'to isolate oneself from others because one possesses a clearer vision of the truth. If God does not call one to solitude, one must live with God in the midst of the multitude, making him known and loved right there' (March 10, 1919)."²³

When Br. Andre was searching for a form of life totally consecrated to God, but in the world, he received a very eloquent letter on this topic from Jacques Maritain:

"A contemplative life in the world? [...] and one which would not even include a direct concern for the apostolate as is characteristic of the Dominican mixed life [of contemplation and action]? However, it can only be justified in the world by the desire to serve souls, and thus to be, in one way or another, given to them, courageously, for their sakes, putting up with all the troubles, bitterness, and the useless comings and goings that are inseparable from interaction with people, if only in order to give witness to the contemplation itself and the Eucharistic love of the Lord. [...]"

²¹ Marguerite Taride, after giving away all her possessions, led a contemplative life of great poverty, working in a factory and living in a gypsy neighborhood on the outskirts of Toulouse. Father Marie Joseph Nicolas, Dominican, was her spiritual director. Through the Dominicans, she received a theological and spiritual formation. (cf. RV, *Histoire* 9, p. 300, note 163).

²² If Rene Voillaume accepted that Maritain gave them "the personal testimony of a life of prayer lived in the world," he affirmed, however, "that it didn't change anything," because Maritain's influence, he said, was played out mainly on the level of expression and they found he expressed well "what they were already living." (cf. J.M. RECONDO, *La oración en René Voillaume*, Burgos 1989, p. 303).

²³ RV, *Preface to the Journal of Raïssa*, in J. and R. MARITAIN, *Œuvres complètes XV*, Éditions universitaires, Fribourg Suisse/ Éditions Saint-Paul Paris, 1993, p. 149.

If you have to remain in the world, I believe that it is with the desire to allow yourself to be consumed by others, preserving only the solitude (which is a very deep part) that is necessary so that God can make you usefully consumable, nourishment for others.²⁴

What more is there to say? The impression, the hope that the Holy Spirit is preparing something in the world, a work of love and of contemplation that calls for people entirely given over and immolated in the very midst of the world.”²⁵

As we can easily see, this text, written twenty years before the foundation of the first working fraternity, admirably expresses the spirituality in which the fraternities would begin.

Did Father Voillaume know of this letter during the period of El-Abiodh? There is no doubt that he did if we take into account the fact that in his first book, printed at the end of 1946 – that is, when the Fraternity was preparing to leave a cloistered life – we find, in quotation marks, the expression “usefully consumable” that Maritain used in his letter.²⁶

On the other hand we need to point out that at El-Abiodh all the Little Brothers had read the spiritual writings of Maritain since Br. Andre had been in charge of their theological formation since 1936.

Without disregarding what Maritain wrote about contemplation in several of his works, –*On the Life of Prayer* (1922), *The Degrees of Knowing* (1932), *Action and Contemplation*, and in *Questions of Conscience* (1938) – it is necessary to highlight what he wrote concerning “contemplation on the roads,” in *The Peasant of the Garonne* (1966) and previously, with Raïssa, in *Liturgy and Contemplation* (1959).²⁷ After he read the text, Rene Voillaume himself wrote as follows to the Little Brothers:

“I admit that I could not keep myself from writing to Jacques Maritain, on behalf of all of us, to tell him of my joy and to thank him for knowing so well how to express what is essential in the vocation of the Little Brothers in the chapter *Contemplation on the Roads*. That is certainly what it is.”²⁸

Finally, we must not forget that after Raïssa’s death in 1960, Maritain lived at the fraternity of the Little Brothers in Toulouse until 1970, the year he asked to be admitted into the Congregation and where he would die as one of its members in 1973. A little after Maritain’s move to Toulouse, Rene Voillaume referred to “this spiritual kinship which has already existed for a long time with our form of religious life [and which] led him to come live among us as an older brother from whom we have a lot to receive [...]. I am happy that you might have the possibility one day or another to meet him, as he has been associated with the spiritual foundation of the Fraternity more than you can imagine.”²⁹

²⁴ Translator’s note: The French version reads, “Si vous devez rester dans le monde, je crois que c’est avec la volonté de vous laisser dévorer par les autres, ne préservant que la part – très grande – de solitude nécessaire pour que Dieu fasse de vous quelque chose d’utilement dévorable.”

²⁵ p. 10 of the booklet edited by the Little Brothers of Jesus written in memory of Maritain after his death, under the title: *Jacques Maritain*.

²⁶ cf. RV, *Les Fraternités du Père de Foucauld. Mission et esprit*, Cerf, Paris 1946, p. 105.

²⁷ cf. J. MARITAIN, *Le paysan de la Garonne* in J. and R. MARITAIN *Œuvres complètes XII*, p. 663-1035 ; J. and R. MARITAIN, *Liturgie et contemplation*, dans *Œuvres complètes XIV*, p. 83-154.

²⁸ RV, *Lettres aux fraternités III*, p. 20-21

²⁹ RV, *Lettres aux fraternités III*, p. 74-75.

In the same sense, Br. Andre spoke of “the unity in the life and work [of Jacques Maritain] and of *their profound harmony with the vocation of the religious who had welcomed him*” – the italics are ours – (Louis Gardet, *Témoignage*, “Cahiers Jacques Maritain” n° 10, 1984, p. 31). See also the letter that Fr. Voillaume wrote from Kolbsheim after Maritain’s death in *Lettres aux fraternités IV (En souvenir de Jacques Maritain)*, p. 162-165.

To summarize, we consider it would be superficial to reduce to one single cause what, in God's providential action – as we have been able to see it – had a manifestly more complex course. For example, in this analysis we cannot leave aside the historico-pastoral context of the Church in France during those years with its dominating theme of missionary concern for the evangelization of the working world. As the title of the celebrated book by Father Godin put it, these were the years of *France - Mission Territory?* All this could not have been unknown in the transformation that was taking place in the Fraternity at that same time. But, in this new dimension that was opening up in the contemplative life of the fraternities, we do want to emphasize the particular role played by the Maritains, especially through Br. Andre.

To end, we must point out that Fr. Voillaume's first book appeared at the beginning of 1947: *Les Fraternités du Père de Foucauld. Mission et esprit.* (*The Fraternities of Charles de Foucauld. Mission and Spirit*). In it he synthesized the study he had made between 1944 and 1945 on the mission of Charles de Foucauld and of his fraternities. This work also reflects the concept that Rene Voillaume had of the vocation of the Little Brothers at the moment of its publication.

A time of expansion

It was the love and the imitation of Jesus of Nazareth that always inspired and directed the journey undertaken by Charles de Foucauld to carry out his vocation. That is what led him to the Trappists, and it was also what made him leave and travel other paths alone, not out of a desire to draw attention to himself but out of fidelity to a call. That call required innovation. Keeping everything in perspective, the same thing occurred in the Fraternity. After its first monastic steps into the "life of Nazareth," it began founding fraternities with a form of life different from that which had characterized it up until then.

In May 1947, the first fraternity among workers was founded in Aix-en-Provence. Rene Voillaume was one of the group and worked as a painter. He wanted to participate personally in this new endeavor of the Little Brothers, even if his responsibility as Prior didn't allow him to remain doing so for a long time.

From that time on, a particularly fruitful period opened up for the Fraternity. The following years saw its new orientation being confirmed and strengthened, and at the same time those years were characterized by an abundance of vocations which resulted in the multiplication and dispersion of the fraternities.

Some numbers help to give an idea: at the end of 1946, twelve Little Brothers had made final profession, twelve also entered the novitiate, and five pronounced first vows. At the beginning of 1951, the number of professed brothers had tripled and there were sixteen fraternities.

It was during these same years that Fr. Voillaume wrote the letters and conferences that were mimeographed in 1949 and published the following year under the title *Au Cœur des Masses*. In these writings of the Prior of the Little Brothers of Jesus, we find the basis for the future spirituality of the fraternities. The book was translated into more than twelve languages (in English: *Seeds of the Desert*) and the numerous re-printings prove that interest in it went well beyond the boundaries of the Fraternity.

During this same period, the new Constitutions of the Little Brothers of Jesus appeared (1951), expressing this new look and their new identity.

"The particular vocation of the Little Brothers of Jesus is to go throughout the world carrying the love of the Lord to humankind, imitating the life of Jesus, workman of Nazareth, and leading

a life of poverty, prayer, and work in intimate contact with those around them. They are to be mixed in with the masses as leaven in the dough in order to contribute, by the witness of their lives, more than by their words, to the establishment of the divine unity of the Savior's fraternal and universal love, over and above all divisions of class, race, or nation" (Article 2).

The ten years of the 50's confirmed the growth and building up of the Fraternity. Thanks to the large number of vocations, the number of fraternities practically tripled during that period. In May 1959, there were already fifty. It is important to mention that they were being set up in quite diverse areas of the world but which always had elements in common either on the religious level (ignorance of Christ or distance from the Church) or on the sociological level (among "those without a name and without influence in the world"). This universal character, a trait that Fr. Voillaume insisted on, under the influence of Little Sister Magdeleine, characterized the very life of the Fraternity from that time on.

Faced with this multiplication of the fraternities, Fr. Voillaume was obliged to travel constantly and to every continent, to either visit the fraternities or prepare new foundations, and he often kept in contact with the Little Brothers by mail. His *Lettres aux fraternités* appeared as the fruit of this period. The first volume – *Témoins silencieux de l'amitié divine (Silent Witnesses of Divine Friendship)* – gathered texts written between 1954 and 1959. The second – *À cause de Jésus et de l'Évangile (Because of Jesus and His Gospel)* – presented others written between 1959 and 1969. The third – *Sur le chemin des hommes (On Human Pathways)* – gathers letters written between 1959 and 1964. Even if numerous articles of his were published in different works during these years, the content of these letters completed and continued what he had developed in *Au coeur des masses (Seeds of the Desert)*, taking into account the experience of the fraternities. In this sense, they contained and expressed the heart of his thinking during those years.

During this same period of time the Charles de Foucauld Secular Fraternity was also developing and the Jesus Caritas Fraternity (a Secular Institute for Women) and the Jesus Caritas Priests Fraternity were coming to birth. They, as well as the Little Sisters of Jesus, all asked Fr. Voillaume to help them. As a result, Rene Voillaume's transmission of the message of Charles de Foucauld gradually spread beyond the borders of his congregation.

On the other hand, while remaining Prior of the Little Brothers of Jesus, Rene Voillaume was led to found the Little Brothers of the Gospel. Their mission was to be the evangelization of milieus that are poor and far from God, in the same spirit of contemplation, poverty, and humble fraternal charity characteristic of Charles de Foucauld. But they were to do so by direct apostolate.

After a few years had gone by, the insertion and presence of Little Brothers and Little Sisters of Jesus in diverse milieus had created the need to offer a direct and explicit evangelization. Thus the Little Brothers of the Gospel were created as a complement to and in continuity with the Little Brothers of Jesus. For similar reason the Little Sisters of the Gospel were created in 1963.

In 1965, in order to devote himself more freely to these younger congregations, Fr. Voillaume submitted his resignation as Prior of the Little Brothers of Jesus – a responsibility he had exercised since the foundation in 1933.

The Fraternity of the Little Brothers of Jesus became a Congregation of Pontifical rite in 1968.

Conclusion

This glance at the life of Fr. Voillaume has allowed us to follow the progressive development of the present day physiognomy of the fraternities and it will allow us to approach his thought more rigorously. In fact, it seems to us that, without this historical study, we would not have had the existential frame of reference in which Fr. Voillaume's reflections on prayer were developed and formulated. Knowing this background is especially necessary in the case of a spiritual master whose teachings characteristically came out of not only the objective data of faith but also his personal Christian experience. This personal experience became a source of the originality of his spiritual theology.

Chapter II

RENE VOILLAUME'S TEACHINGS ABOUT PRAYER - AND THOSE TO WHOM THEY WERE ADDRESSED

On Christmas Day 1965, Fr. Voillaume wrote his letter of resignation as Prior of the Little Brothers of Jesus. This marked a new step in his personal life which would affect the course of his reflections and his writings.³⁰

It was actually the result of a process which had begun several years before.

Openness to multiple requests

From the 1950's on, Fr. Voillaume's life had little by little become filled with multifaceted activity. This change was very much linked to the fact that, at that moment, the spiritual message of Charles de Foucauld was resonating deeply with laity and priests.

Rene Voillaume was thus solicited to preach various retreats which eventually gave birth to the "Priests Union" and the "Charles de Foucauld Secular Fraternity." The "Jesus Caritas" Secular Institute for Women was also in the planning stage. In addition to the spiritual accompaniment and counseling that Fr. Voillaume was giving these groups, we must add the foundation in 1956 of the Little Brothers of the Gospel and, at the same time, the project with Fr. Lebreton to create the Famei (Fraternité d'Amitié et d'Entraide Internationale = the International Fraternity of Friendship and Mutual Help).³¹

Recalling the many responsibilities and much work which characterized his life during those years, Rene Voillaume himself admitted: "In what concerned my personal life during that time, when I reread the diaries I wrote during my trips, I myself am surprised to see the number of meetings and retreats I participated in and which occurred one after the other without a break."³²

If we add to that the foundation of the Little Sisters of the Gospel in 1963, we can understand that such a situation inevitably provoked a pulling in different directions that rendered the exercise of his charge as Prior of the Little Brothers of Jesus more and more difficult. That is why, considering that the Congregation had already attained sufficient solidity and maturity, Rene Voillaume presented his resignation as Prior at the end of 1965 in a manner that was irrevocable.³³ This decision didn't disconnect him from his Little Brothers, for whom he remained the founder and father, but he was thus able to devote himself more earnestly to the newer foundations of the Little Brothers and Little Sisters of the Gospel.³⁴

³⁰ Rene Voillaume himself implied as much. Shortly after leaving the task of prior and after a week of retreat in Beni-Abbes, he wrote to the fraternities, "This retreat came as a long-desired halt between two periods of my life: the first which came to an end last August during the General Chapter of the Little Brothers of Jesus (for more than thirty years, I had always borne the responsibility of their foundation), and the second which begins now with the taking in charge of the Fraternities of the Gospel." (*Lettres aux Fraternités IV*, p.30).

³¹ Cf. RV, *Histoire 10*, p. 95-101.

³² RV, *Histoire 10*, p. 100.

³³ Cf. RV, *Lettre aux Petits Frères de Jésus, Noël 1965*, « Jesus Caritas » n° 142, 1966, p. 101-108.

³⁴ Let us also remember that Fr. Voillaume was always a Little Brother of Jesus: thanks to a personal indult granted by Paul VI, he was able to assume the government of the Fraternities of the Gospel without ceasing to be a Little Brother of Jesus.

The signs of a new step

Despite Rene Voillaume's desire to continue participating closely in the life of the Little Brothers of Jesus, we can see that, with the years, his distancing from the Fraternity only increased more and more – a distancing which had begun even before he left his responsibility as Prior. Several elements allow us to spot this fact, but Fr. Voillaume made no explicit reference to it in his writings:

a) It is not accidental that in *El Abiodh-Sidi-Cheikh*, his historical study of the Little Brothers of Jesus, Rene Voillaume related in meticulous detail the life of the congregation up to the 50's –nine of the ten books that make up this work are consecrated to it. Afterwards, totally changing his methodology, his exposition of the following period was more general and less precise.

In this regard we must note that, for the first period, he relied on the abundant documentation that was constantly confronting him - diaries, letters, and different writings of the time - while from the 60's on, he referred especially to what had been reported and discussed in the General Chapters of the Congregation. Moreover, he himself recognized that this last part of the work was less of a success and that it provoked several objections within the Fraternity.³⁵

b) We must also note that in *El Abiodh-Sidi-Cheikh*, R. Voillaume, referring to the "important dates in the history of the Fraternity," consecrated a good number of pages to the 50's. Furthermore, he appeared constantly as the protagonist in them. While for the 60's to the 80's, the most important facts are mentioned in less than a page and he hardly made any allusion to himself.³⁶

c) A cursory glance at his bibliography allows us to note a shift during the 60's and 70's: up until then his writings were fundamentally addressed to the fraternities or to diverse groups of the spiritual family of Charles de Foucauld, but we can notice from then on a growing heterogeneity in his audience. We can also observe that his writings concerning the life of the Little Brothers of Jesus are less frequent. And when he would again address the fraternities, as for the annual retreat he gave to the Little Sisters of Jesus at Tre Fontane (Rome), we can verify that there were few things that were not already contained, in one way or another, in what he had already said during the 50's.

Those to whom Rene Voillaume's teachings on prayer were addressed: two categories

If we have pointed out this gradual distancing of Fr. Voillaume in regards to the evolution in the life of the Little Brothers, it is because we believe that this fact had consequences on his reflection and writings:

1) The expression of the spiritual life of the fraternities whose traits he drew up in the 50's and 60's, in particular in *Seeds of the Desert* and in his *Letters to the Fraternities*, did not afterwards receive the elaboration we might have expected to accompany the evolution in the life of the Little Brothers. The fact that Fr. Voillaume only participated indirectly in that stage of the life of the Congregation was, in our opinion, at the origin of this deficiency.

2) As we said above, beginning in the 50's, the influence of the message of Charles de Foucauld and of the spiritual experience of the fraternities had spread to laity and priests. From that time on, Rene Voillaume made a point of addressing them. But we must note that, beginning in the 60's, he addressed an audience that went beyond the spiritual family of Charles de Foucauld.

He himself recalled what Little Sister Magdeleine, foundress of the Little Sisters of Jesus, had said to him about this: "I believe that the principal contribution [of Little Sister Magdeleine]

³⁵ Cf. J. M. RECONDO, *La oración en René Voillaume*, Burgos 1989, p. 302

³⁶ Cf. *Histoire 10*, p. 4-10.

was to oblige me to see further than the Fraternity of brothers. She assured me several times [...], even before the fraternities among workers existed, that my mission would expand to include the Little Sisters, priests, and laity throughout the world.”³⁷

Taking all of that into account allows us to distinguish two types of audiences Fr. Voillaume addressed on the topic of prayer throughout the years.

On the one hand, there are his teachings on the subject of the contemplative life of the fraternities, which we find especially in his writings of the 50's and 60's, intended for the Little Brothers of Jesus.

And on the other hand, there are his writings and conferences about the contemplative dimension of Christian life in general. And here, in all that R. Voillaume formulated for the laity, priests, and diverse religious on the subject of prayer, we must include a good part of the teachings which, as well as being addressed to the Little Brothers and Little Sisters, extended to all baptized persons because they are not necessarily connected specifically to the vocation of the fraternities.

Conclusion

Inevitably, broad overviews or outlines are always somewhat arbitrary. Compared to their skeletal clarity, the reality is much richer, more complex, and impossible to put in categories. But we must realize that we need interpretive outlines or broad overviews to understand the reality better on the whole.

Thus, in the third chapter, we will present the teachings of R. Voillaume on prayer as intended for the fraternities. And then in the fourth, the teachings addressed to all those who, by their baptism, are called to develop the contemplative dimension of their Christian life.

³⁷ RV, *Histoire* 9, p. 296.

Chapter III

THE CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE OF THE FRATERNITIES

Charles de Foucauld is the principal inspiration behind the religious life of the fraternities, but he did not leave a systematically formulated spiritual doctrine. The majority of his writings are personal notes not intended for publication.

It was up to Rene Voillaume to elaborate and present the principal lines defining the spirituality of the fraternities. That explains the importance of his writings for the life of the Little Brothers of Jesus and also, in their own way, for the Little Sisters of Jesus.

As we have already seen, after that first stage in which the Little Brothers gradually clarified their own particular identity, R. Voillaume became the voice of this experience, seeking a more precise conceptualization of the definitive ideal of the fraternities. That was expressed during the 50's and 60's in the texts that make up *Au cœur des masses* (*Seeds of the Desert*) and his *Lettres aux Fraternités* (*Letters to the Fraternities*), as well as in the *Règle de vie des Petits Frères de Jésus* (*Rule of Life of the Little Brothers of Jesus*) drafted by him in 1950 and reformulated in 1962. Thus it will be primarily in these sources that we will find his thoughts about the contemplative life of the fraternities.

We are thinking that it is good to start with a synthesis and to proceed afterwards with an analysis. To do this, we will use the text which the Church used in elevating the Fraternity to the rank of a Pontifical Right Congregation in 1968. Starting with this as a guideline, we will see – especially in the writings mentioned above – how Rene Voillaume explained the elements which give the contemplative life of the fraternities its particular features and on what he bases them.

The text of the decree of the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes (Rome, June 13, 1968) reads as follows:

“This institute, following the example of Nazareth, humble and hidden, finds its end and its fulfillment in its own particular kind of contemplative life, adoration of Christ in the sacrament of the Eucharist, the exercise of Gospel poverty, manual work, and a real participation in the social condition of those who find themselves deprived and stripped of everything.”

1 – “A Particular Kind of Contemplative Life”

“Charles de Foucauld always considered himself a monk and a contemplative. The Little Brothers are also contemplatives, but not like other contemplatives.”³⁸

Rene Voillaume began his letter on the contemplative life of the fraternities with this affirmation. To understand it, we must show how the Little Brothers differentiate themselves from traditional contemplative life. But first we must show in what ways they maintain a fundamental continuity with it.

³⁸ RV, *Au cœur des masses*, 1^{ère} édition, p. 177. [The first edition of *Au cœur des masses* is reasonably different from subsequent editions; we will refer to it specifying that it is the 1st edition: *Au cœur des masses*, 1^{ère} édition.]

The contemplative life.

By contemplative life, we do not mean the personal life of a Christian whose prayer is contemplative – or strives to be – but the life led by a religious family within the people of God and recognized by the Church as “contemplative.”³⁹ It is in this sense that Saint Thomas Aquinas affirmed that “those we call contemplatives are not those who contemplate, but those who consecrate their whole life to contemplation.”⁴⁰

–Contemplation

Contemplative life, however, can only be understood in reference to the contemplation to which it is so ordained. Therefore, we must begin by specifying what we mean by contemplation. Rene Voillaume defined it as “an experiential and supernatural knowledge of God, perceived by an innate love under the influx of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.”⁴¹

In itself, supernatural contemplation is out of the direct reach of the one who is praying and responds to a grace that God alone can grant. However, there exists a whole set of acts of which we are capable that prepare us for it and lead us towards it, so well that normally they are necessary to reach contemplation. The gift of this grace is mysteriously gratuitous and can never be demanded as due to us because of our preparation, but it is usually the prolongation of this preparation and the normal continuation of our “journey” towards God. What is certain is that many persons are often deprived of this grace of contemplation because they lack the necessary preparation for welcoming this gift. This stated, Rene Voillaume concluded that contemplation usually supposes a preparation which has its own particular requirements.⁴²

–Contemplation and “contemplative life”

When he analyzed these requirements, R. Voillaume judged it important to distinguish between those that belong to the preparation of the soul itself and those that touch the exterior conditions of life.

In the first category, Fr. Voillaume considered *death to all that is not God* as the ultimate disposition of the soul for receiving the grace of contemplation. That supposes a deep detachment from all of creation and especially from ourselves. It doesn’t mean that such a death is fully in our power: it is the grace of contemplation itself that will achieve it totally in us, making the purifying fire of love penetrate those depths in which we can do nothing by ourselves. In spite of everything, while we wait for this radical stripping and emptying of ourselves to be accomplished by the action of God in our hearts, even though it can only be achieved in an imperfect way really, we must at least intentionally love and desire it.⁴³

Furthermore, this death through which the soul little by little achieves the necessary disposition must not be understood only and primarily in a negative sense. This movement of renouncing ourselves comes as a fruit of our bonding with God through love. “It is thus in the order of *the love of God and others* that the essential predisposition to the grace of contemplation is situated.”⁴⁴

³⁹ Cf. Vatican II Council, *Perfectae Caritatis*, 7.

⁴⁰ *Summa Theologica* 2a–2ae q. 81, a 1, ad 5.

⁴¹ RV, *Au cœur des masses*, 1^{ère} édition, p. 178.

⁴² Cf. *Ibid.*

⁴³ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 179-180.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p. 180.

The fact that the ultimate disposition of the soul is situated on the level of love explains that the gift of this grace is open to Christians of every condition and state. This is precisely because the preparation a person can offer is more connected to the interior disposition of the heart than to exterior conditions of life.

However, it is nonetheless certain that a whole set of exterior means are particularly apt in preparing for contemplation. In Christianity, they have historically reached their greatest expression in the orders recognized by the Church as contemplative. Their centuries of experience in this matter have made that these practices could be considered as especially advantageous. Among them, Fr. Voillaume especially highlighted the cloister and silence.

He recognized that the monastic observances of the cloister and of exterior silence create the conditions of life that are particularly favorable to accomplishing this death to all created things that renders possible the perfect union with God. But he added that one must not think that the fact alone of exteriorly embracing such a walk of life disposes the soul right away to contemplation.⁴⁵

For the Christian monk, the cloister and silence are just instruments in the service of love and they maintain their effectiveness only in the measure that they lead to the development of love of God and others. It is precisely in their relation to this love of God and others that they are able to dispose a person to contemplation. This explains why, in fact, these practices can be ineffective, either because of a lack of generosity in the subject or because they are revealed as inadequate for a certain type of temperament.⁴⁶

According to R. Voillaume, that obliges us to distinguish between the interior dispositions that these practices are intended to produce in the soul and the practices or observances considered in themselves. It also obliges us to ask ourselves in what measure the observances of cloister and of silence, as they are practiced in the traditional contemplative orders, have an absolute value as a means for the contemplative life.

From there, we thus arrive at seeing the possibility – and the validity – of this special contemplative life that the fraternities represent in the Church. They suppose a certain continuity with the preceding monastic experience, and at the same time a certain rupture in relation to it.

To understand this better, it seems opportune to recall what is considered as indispensable to the realization of contemplative life, no matter its form. Fr. Voillaume said that it necessarily implies a double element: “The Church invests the religious contemplative with a mission in the Mystical Body of Christ, an invisible mission but which is expressed concretely by a visible separation from other human activities.”⁴⁷

⁴⁵ It is in these aspects, R. Voillaume added, that the Christian monastic conception can be distinguished from the majority of efforts carried out outside of the Church to attain communion with the divinity (cf. RV, *Au cœur des masses* 1^{ère} édition, p.183). This seems to echo what Jacques Maritain affirmed in his time: “Christian contemplation rises above all from the Holy Spirit who blows where he wills. We hear his voice and don’t know where it’s coming from or where it is going (Jn.3:8). This signifies that Christian contemplation is the exact opposite of a technical affair. Natural spirituality, like that in India, for example, has very precise techniques. This system of techniques is what right away strikes the person who begins to study comparative mysticisms. And one of the most obvious differences between Christian mysticism and the other mysticisms is its freedom with regard to techniques and every recipe or formula.” (J. et R. MARITAIN, *Liturgie et Contemplation*, dans *Œuvres complètes* XIV, Éditions universitaires, Fribourg Suisse/ Éditions Saint-Paul Paris, 1993, p. 130).

⁴⁶ When generosity is lacking, the observances which one supposes will favor detachment of heart so that it can expand in love, could become the refuge of a petty attitude in regards to God and in regards to one’s neighbor. (cf. RV, *Au cœur des masses*, 1^{ère} édition, p. 183-186).

⁴⁷ RV, *Au cœur des masses*, 1^{ère} édition, p. 188.

The contemplative life proper to the fraternities

In order to show the contemplative character of the life of the fraternities, it is necessary to specify the spiritual mission which the Little Brothers of Jesus have received from the Church and the concrete form of separation which gives it its visible expression. We will begin with this last aspect.

–*Separation and presence*

Neither Charles de Foucauld nor the Little Brothers of Jesus ever doubted the contemplative orientation of their vocation. That implied, therefore, a separation. Except that this separation was not going to consist in the traditional material cloister but, rather, in the renouncement of a whole range of activities which included both the ministry of preaching as well as any explicit apostolic work or organized charity. The separation would be in the order of activities but not in the order of *presence* among people.

“The aspect which is proper to the contemplative vocation of Charles de Foucauld and which radically distinguishes it from that of other contemplative orders, is, therefore, that it must be lived in contact with people and in the midst of them.”⁴⁸

Charles de Foucauld’s burning desire to imitate Jesus of Nazareth led him to seek configuration with Jesus, both interiorly in the attitude of a life turned toward the bosom of the Father (cf Jn.1:18) and exteriorly in embracing “the humble and obscure existence of God, workman in Nazareth.”⁴⁹

Thus, it was the mystery of Nazareth which shaped this original form of religious life with the contemplative service of God at the heart of an effective presence among people. It is this mystery of Nazareth that resolves the apparent contradiction between the separation and the presence called for by this vocation in regards to people. It is thus in *the very midst of people* that this setting apart will be carried out, because it is there that the Little Brothers are called to live this “totalitarian priority,”⁵⁰ this “primordial preoccupation” with the search for God which is proper to every contemplative vocation.⁵¹

We see, therefore, that the Little Brothers are to lead their contemplative life not *in spite of* this situation but *in it*, in the very midst of the masses of humankind.⁵²

Despite everything, this particularity of the life of the fraternities is disconcerting to many people who observe their vocation from the outside. This was verified by Rene Page, Fr. Voillaume’s successor as Prior of the Fraternity, who said, “We can understandably be

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

⁴⁹ Ch. de FOUCAULD, *Œuvres Spirituelles*, Seuil, Paris 1958, p. 32.

⁵⁰ RV, *Au cœur des masses 1st edition*, p. 190.

⁵¹ The vocation to the contemplative life is expressed in a *primordial* preoccupation with the search for God which, even if it is of course common to every religious life, acquires here a radicality and immediacy that determines the direction of all the rest “like a dominant strong wind that causes all the vegetation to bend in the direction it is blowing.” (P.-R. REGAMEY, *L’exigence de Dieu*, Paris 1969, p. 114).

⁵² Cf. RV, *Les Fraternités du Père de Foucauld. Mission et esprit*, p. 124-126.

Nevertheless, Fr. Voillaume remarked that “only a person presenting a minimum of interior formation in the path of union with God is able to find nourishment in his or her contact with people, rather than finding it to be an obstacle to contemplation. Thus, the novitiate and the years of formation and study that follow are consecrated to educating the interior life of the religious in this way: this time will be especially reserved for the formation of a solid Eucharistic life of prayer” (*Les Fraternités du Père de Foucauld*, p. 124).

reproached for having sought out difficulty and for wanting to make a circle square in speaking of contemplative life in the midst of the hubbub, without cloister or silence, believing we could still find a place for ourselves that did not involve pastoral tasks and temporal responsibilities.”⁵³

There will be some people, therefore, for whom the meaning of the presence of the Little Brothers in the midst of humankind and the possibility of a contemplative life in these conditions will remain obscure. For others, on the contrary, it will be difficult to understand their separation. They say, “Why, if they are in the world, do they not say and do all that they can in terms of apostolate?”

To that we must add that for the Little Brothers themselves this particular form of separation was sometimes problematic: “The temptation to personal fulfillment in an exterior action with immediate results or by using actively effective means will be more compelling on certain days. Renouncing them constitutes our cloister and our deepest self-detachment or emptying of self.”⁵⁴

We must, therefore, adequately understand the meaning of this separation: “This refusal [of Charles de Foucauld] was not spiritual timidity, nor fear of responsibilities, nor just to preserve a life of intimacy with God. Neither was it presented as an impoverishment of his spiritual personality nor as a lessening of real or deep action in the world of persons. Far from that, this separation placed Charles de Foucauld and later the Little Brothers who came after him in a true state of contemplative life, of which it was the sign and direct expression at the same time as it obviously affected its attainment.”⁵⁵

–The mission of the fraternities

Separation, as a component of the contemplative life, is ultimately just the opposite of a mission. In the case of the fraternities, mission is made up of a double element: the Little Brothers of Jesus must “bear witness, shout the Gospel by [their] lives, and fully carry out contemplation of the mystery of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.”⁵⁶

–Silent apostolate

At the end of 1985, when Pope John Paul II visited the General House of the Little Sisters of Jesus at Tre Fontane (Rome), he referred to this particular aspect of the vocation of the fraternities which consists in being present in the midst of humanity as “silent witnesses of divine friendship”, according to the title Rene Voillaume gave to one of his letters on this theme.⁵⁷

“I have thought again and again about the problem of your identity, of your apostolate. Sometimes I even asked myself why they keep silent, why they don’t speak. But I understand more and more that in the great wealth and diversity of vocations in the Church it is appropriate and necessary to also have this quite unique vocation of presence, apostolate of presence, to give witness to the truth and to the reality of God, a God who cannot be expressed in human words. There is only one Word, the Word who is the Son of God, who is always an absolutely

⁵³ R. PAGE, *Petits Frères de Jésus dans le monde d’aujourd’hui*, “Les Petits Frères de Jésus”, n°s 51-52, 1972, p. 10

⁵⁴ RV, *Lettres aux fraternités I*, p. 293.

⁵⁵ RV, *Au cœur des masses*, 1^{ère} édition, p. 190.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

⁵⁷ RV, *Lettres aux fraternités I*, p. 335-346.

transcendent reality for our human words. So, it is a good path to express it without words, to express it in keeping quiet, in silence, in contemplation, in adoration, in love.

As your superior so desires, I want my words to ‘confirm’ your vocation in the Church. I want your vocation to be recognized by the Church, and I want to tell you that it is a relevant, authentic, and necessary vocation.”⁵⁸

In line with the Pope’s remarks, Fr. Voillaume affirmed back in 1962 that the apostolate carried out by Christians through preaching the Word and administering the sacraments does not exhaust all the means Jesus uses in his Church to manifest himself. There are in fact some divine truths, in particular certain aspects of the merciful love with which God surrounds the sinner, which cannot be expressed fully in words, but only by means of *a certain manner of living*. Jesus himself, incarnate Word of God, did not content himself with instructing us through oral teachings. He judged it necessary to manifest to us the feelings of his heart and certain attitudes of the merciful love of God by his very way of being and living.

“All of that manifests a constant and essential aspect of God’s revelation in the Incarnation and a quality of love of the divine Shepherd who saves his sheep, a quality consisting of the respect, humility, patience, and mercy that no teaching in words can completely express or convey. Now if Jesus had wanted to continue teaching through the Church and passing on this divine life by means of the sacraments, how could he cease communicating to us what only his way of living could make us understand?

Herein lies the understanding of ‘the vocation of a Little Brother and what it means to “Cry the Gospel by one’s life,” the expression Br Charles [de Foucauld] used to define the exterior mission of the fraternities and so justify their form of religious life.”⁵⁹

Emphasizing the apostolic potentialities of this silent presence, R. Voillaume said that the Little Brothers seem to have been called to manifest, by their very way of loving, the mysterious respect for the freedom of mind and heart that we find in God: this untiring patience of God’s mercy which sits humbly at the door of the sinner or unbeliever and waits. “To manifest to someone a friendship that is not at all for personal gain, loving the person for him or herself, without trying to convince or lead the person to faith, but of course without hiding one’s faith, could often be the only way to reveal the fullness of God’s love.”⁶⁰

Following Charles de Foucauld, the Little Brothers are to give witness in the midst of the world to a life of intimacy with Jesus, but this testimony is not sought for its own sake:

“Our life of union with Jesus is not desired for that, because it is not a means but an end in itself. We must simply be present.”⁶¹

⁵⁸ Jean-Paul II, *Address to the Little Sisters of Jesus, Tre Fontane, December 22, 1985*, “Nouvelles des Fraternités” December, 1986, p. 7. It seems legitimate to wonder if these reflections were not in John-Paul’s thoughts when, a very short time after this visit, he wrote his *Letter to priests on the occasion of Holy Thursday* (March 16, 1986). He said there, “If the goal is assuredly to gather the people of God around the Eucharistic mystery with catechesis and penance, other apostolic approaches, depending on the circumstances, are also necessary: sometimes a simple presence for years, a silent witness to the faith in non-Christianized milieus, or a closeness to people, to their families and their concerns. This is a first announcement which tries to awaken unbelievers and the lukewarm to the faith. This is the witness of charity and of justice shared with lay Christians and which renders the faith more credible and puts it into practice.”

⁵⁹ RV, *Règle de vie des Petits Frères de Jésus*, 1962, p. 24.

Rene Voillaume explained that “in the Church, through the lives of saints and the witness of religious, there has always been this kind of teaching by one’s life. The difference here is that the Little Brothers of Jesus have a form of religious life more fully oriented toward this way of teaching the Gospel values the world so needs, teaching them only by one’s life.” (*Règle de vie des Petits Frères de Jésus*, 1962, p. 24, note 1).

⁶⁰ RV, *Lettres aux fraternités I*, p. 337.

⁶¹ RV, *Au cœur des masses*, 1^{ère} édition, p. 191

“And so that such an attitude is not [simply] a method of approach, it must be lived by the Little Brothers as an invitation of the Heart of Jesus, an invitation that can only be the fruit of a contemplative life.”⁶²

Here we have the other characteristic trait of the mission of the Fraternities (of course, the presence of the Little Brothers in the world is necessary for radiating the Gospel by one’s life, but this aspect of his mission is, in spite of all, something that has been derived):

“What we must want first of all and above all is this total communion with the life of the Sacred Heart, which is the very goal of our life, and which also, in and of itself, requires contact with people in order to be lived to the full.”⁶³

–Saviors with Jesus: the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the contemplative life of the fraternities

Glancing through the major characteristics in the history of contemplative religious life, Fr. Voillaume pointed out that, starting with modern times, contemplative life tends to leave the cloister and penetrate the daily life of persons in order to assume their needs and sufferings as much as to expiate their sins. He affirmed that, that seems to correspond with a development in Christian spirituality which more and more is always seeking its source and its path in the contemplation of the mystery of the Heart of Jesus. The revelations of the Sacred Heart to Saint Margaret Mary opened a new stage in the prayer life of contemplatives.

The goal of contemplation was no longer the seeking of God alone but also the effort to identify with and pattern one’s life on that of the Heart of Jesus, Redeemer of the World. This introduced among other things a Christocentric focus in contemplative life, in which Jesus communicates his concerns and sufferings to us and associates us to his work as Savior.

“It was into this line of thinking that the spirituality of Charles de Foucauld and the fraternities introduced itself, entirely centered on the mystery of the Sacred Heart of the Savior Jesus. We have already noted this particularity of the spirituality of Charles de Foucauld which, from the very beginning, associated the intense redemptive activity of the Sacred Heart with the life of Nazareth. The soul and spirit of the obscure worker of Nazareth, in the silence of his relationship with his Father, must have been overflowing with passion for the salvation of the world and with impatient desire to save through the offering of his life.”⁶⁴

The Little Brothers, too, must center themselves on the Heart of Jesus if they want to penetrate the mystery of Nazareth: “The life of Nazareth is Jesus living thirty years without defined exterior activities. A Little Brother cannot live Nazareth if his life is not entirely conformed to the life and intimate activity of Jesus, to that of his Sacred Heart.”⁶⁵

There are very few texts in which Charles de Foucauld refers to devotion to the Sacred Heart for its own sake, but it is easy to see that the Heart of Jesus for him underlies everything and emerges at every moment as something so natural that a more explicit reference seems unnecessary. For Brother Charles, devotion to the Sacred Heart is inseparable from devotion to the very person of Jesus. And the irresistible need to resemble the Lord, which he had felt from the beginning, led him to desire to be conformed to the very feelings of Jesus’ Heart. This search for conformity gave birth to his desire to lay down his life for others which was expressed above all in his longing for martyrdom. But afterwards he adopted an attitude of constant

⁶² RV, *Lettres aux fraternités I*, p. 339.

⁶³ RV, *Au cœur des masses*, 1^{ère} édition, p. 192.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

⁶⁵ RV, *Lettres aux fraternités I*, p. 289.

interior offering of himself which was especially expressed in his desire to participate in the *redemptive work of Jesus* through suffering:

“To desire sufferings, in order to render Him love for love and imitate Him [...], to enter into His work, to offer myself with Him, even though I am nothing, in sacrifice, as a victim, for the sanctification of humankind.”⁶⁶

The Little Brothers share in this vocation and are called, along with Brother Charles, to be “saviors with Jesus.”⁶⁷

“We love Jesus. We would like to share in all His work as Savior and in all His sufferings. [...] It’s a question of really understanding the meaning of the Cross in our lives and joyfully and generously accepting that Jesus lets us become part of his work. Our soul must be ready to welcome suffering, to understand its value, and little by little to love it. This must be a permanent state of the soul that we have to and want to work at establishing in ourselves from now on. We can call it a spirit of offering our lives for others, which indicates the value of sacrifice and of oblation that this disposition of soul gives to all our actions.”⁶⁸

“In establishing your soul in this state of self-offering, you create unity in your life and your life thus becomes one single act turned toward God, one single oblation lived each instant. It is this that makes our life truly contemplative. But it is so in a spirit of atonement, of redemption which confers its particular nuance on it.”⁶⁹

This longing of the Little Brothers to entirely unite themselves to the Heart of Jesus could not be carried out well without a deep concern for the redemption of humankind and for their sufferings. This is because everything is the same reality in the unity of the Mystical Body of the Redeemer.

“Humankind is too close to the Heart of the Jesus for their suffering and their physical and moral misery not to have a profound effect on Jesus’ Heart. And so we, too, will feel all this suffering within ourselves.”⁷⁰

“Let’s not seek not to see, let’s not forget and be distracted from all these hardships that weigh down our brothers and sisters. On the contrary, our soul must warmly welcome the worries and miseries of others. Let’s not enclose our inner life in an oasis of indifference under the pretext of preserving our quiet recollection. Let’s let ourselves be invaded by all the suffering, despair, and cries of distress of the whole of humanity. In Christ we are in solidarity with everyone. Our silent conversations with Jesus must make us more and more sensitive to everything that hurts our brothers and sisters, feeling it within ourselves painfully. And vice versa, all the pain we feel from the suffering of our brothers and sisters must lead us to greater comprehension of the mysterious abyss of Jesus’ Heart.”⁷¹

While affirming this, Fr Voillaume also drew our attention to a possible danger inherent in this attitude:

“The pitfall to avoid is letting one’s compassion become an unhealthy sensitivity, becoming wrapped up in the suffering or getting crushed by it. The joy of the cross must dominate

⁶⁶ Ch. de FOUCAULD, *Écrits Spirituels*, De Gigord, Paris 1947, p. 67.

⁶⁷ This is the title of one of Fr. Voillaume’s important letters, in which he presents this dimension of the life of the fraternities (*Au cœur des masses*, p. 215-229).

⁶⁸ RV, *Au cœur des masses*, p. 216-219.

On numerous occasions, Rene Voillaume spoke of the influence that Saint Theresa of the Child Jesus had on him for all that relates to the understanding of the redemptive significance of human suffering in the spiritual life. (cf. *Histoire 1*, p. 146-147 and p. 162; *Histoire 4*, p. 59-60; *Histoire 5*, p. 46).

⁶⁹ RV, *Au cœur des masses*, p. 229.

⁷⁰ RV, *Au cœur des masses*, 1^{ère} édition, p. 197.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, p. 202.

everything. Our compassion must not be pity or purely on the level of feelings. Our state of soul must be in communion with the very mystery of Christ and must consequently have that unspeakable peace and joy that always flooded the depths of the soul of the Incarnate Word.

The chief risk of these contacts is, thus, that they are only felt by us in a very sensitive and human way. This is why we need to be constantly and very genuinely united with Jesus. Our Eucharistic life should provide us with this. It alone can little by little elevate the concerns, fatigues, and sufferings brought to us in these contacts with others to the reality of a participation in the mystery of the Cross of Jesus.”⁷²

One of the strongest motives that led the Little Brothers to abandon the cloistered life was the desire to share the plight of the disadvantaged in a very real way. Contact and relationships with people were not simply required for carrying out a life that was poor, but also “for the very truth of a contemplative life whose goal was union with the whole Christ, the Christ with all its members. This life desires to be a real participation in the sufferings of the Head and its members.”⁷³

“The type of contemplative life that Charles de Foucauld bequeathed to us is not just marked by the fact that this life is lived *in the midst of the world and sharing the conditions of the poor*, (which also entails a transformation in the means we use to achieve a contemplative life) but also by the fact that, on a deeper level, *this contemplative life itself, centered on the Heart of Christ, opens out onto the mystery of loving humankind*, contemplated in its divine source.”⁷⁴

From then on it was in the contemplation of the Heart of Jesus and in becoming like Him that would give unity to the contemplative life of the Fraternities. It is there that the apparently contradictory elements which constitute the religious life of the Little Brothers come together.

“The whole life of Charles de Foucauld was consecrated to the Heart of Christ as the only place where [...] these two movements of love come together, even though they appear to be contradictory in the actual conditions in which they are carried out. One of these movements leads us to love God to the point of separation from creation, and the other leads us to love others in a total presence to their daily earthly preoccupations.”⁷⁵

Further on we will develop the Eucharistic dimension of the life of the fraternities, seeking to understand it more deeply. But here it seems necessary to point out that in the vocation of the Little Brothers, there exists an intimate relationship between participation in the mystery of the Heart of Jesus and their Eucharistic life. In his own religious experience, Charles de Foucauld had already presented these two realities as being clearly related. Fr. Voillaume, too, would take care to see that they were not lost from view in the spiritual experience of the fraternities.

“As a result of our efforts, combined with the action of the Holy Spirit, this state of offering ourselves to suffering out of love, which tends to gradually become habitual, merely clarifies the character of being a victim with Christ which is imprinted on our souls by baptism. It is in the celebration of the Eucharist that we exercise this character liturgically, offering ourselves in a real way with Jesus. Thus I don’t need to emphasize here the primordial importance of the Eucharistic sacrifice in our lives as saviors.

In the Eucharistic celebration we attain, to the very maximum, this communion with Christ crucified and offered. Our own life of self offering must be the way we carry this out daily.”⁷⁶

⁷² *Ibid*, p. 202-203.

⁷³ *Ibid*, p. 199.

⁷⁴ RV, *La contemplation dans l’Église d’aujourd’hui*, p. 61.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁷⁶ RV, *Au cœur des masses*, p. 227.

2 – “Following the Example of Nazareth”

As soon as Charles de Foucauld discovered in the Gospel that it was necessary to “wrap everything in love” and that “the first effect of this was imitation”, he did not feel called to imitate Jesus in His public life of preaching, but rather that he must imitate him in the hidden life of the humble and poor workman of Nazareth.”⁷⁷ In this sense, Fr. Voillaume considered that “in the unfolding of his life by stages seemingly so dissimilar, this ideal appears to have been the focal point to which all his aspirations referred from the day of his conversion until his death.”⁷⁸ We find this expressed in the following note in the journal of Charles de Foucauld:

“In everything and for everything, take [...] the life of Nazareth as your goal, in its simplicity and its breadth, using the rule only as you would use a Directory, helping you for certain things to enter into the life of Nazareth [...]: no religious habit – like Jesus in Nazareth; no cloister – like Jesus in Nazareth; no dwelling located far from inhabited places, but close to a village – like Jesus in Nazareth; not less than eight hours of work per day (manual or otherwise, as much as possible manual) – like Jesus in Nazareth; no large piece of land or large dwellings, nor big expenses, nor even large alms, but extreme poverty in everything – like Jesus in Nazareth.”⁷⁹

The life of Nazareth

According to Rene Voillaume, the ideal of the religious life as conceived of by Charles de Foucauld, taking Nazareth as his inspiration, consists of two essential elements:

a) First, for him “Nazareth” incarnates a style of religious life which must integrate and keep together a real poverty of housing and standard of living with the insecurity and hard work proper to a working class family.

Brother Charles was very much attracted to the dimension of social humility that manual work conferred on the “life of Nazareth.” It played a decisive role in his vocation and was one of the principle reasons he left the Trappists. It is also one of the reasons he resisted the eventuality of priesthood for so long, out of fear that the dignity of the ministry would impose a social behavior incompatible with the imitation of a worker’s poverty.

“This important aspect of sharing the lot of the poor that gave birth to the congregations of the Little Brothers and Little Sisters of Jesus, must not be forgotten because all flows from that. If this congregation is called to live mixed-in with the poor, embracing *social poverty* and not just religious poverty (the different kinds of poverty must be clearly distinguished), it is because of this intuition of Charles de Foucauld.”⁸⁰

“The manual work of the poor must be the normal means of subsistence for the Fraternity, just as it was for Jesus and his family. There is a direct connection between this kind of work and poverty. [...] It is by sharing in the daily work necessary for living that the assimilation of

⁷⁷ Ch. de FOUCAULD, *Lettres à Henry de Castries*, Paris 1938, p. 96-97.

⁷⁸ RV, *Au cœur des masses*, p. 187.

⁷⁹ Ch. de FOUCAULD, *Carnets de Tamanrasset. 1905-1916*, Nouvelle Cité, Paris 1986, p. 46.

⁸⁰ RV, *Retraite de la Fraternité Séculière. IV-Nazareth*, p. 3.

R. Voillaume reminded the “Little Brothers and Little Sisters of Charles de Foucauld that their first mission is to become the brothers and sisters of the poor, not only by loving them but by belonging socially to the class of the poor, in every aspect of their lives. [...] Belonging to the world of the poor carries with it the obligation for the fraternities to live from their work, without being able to receive alms. It brings with it also the choice of neighbourhood and housing, hospitalization in case of illness, and a certain way of living and of eating.” (*Au cœur des masses*, p. 33 et 36).

the Fraternity into the world of the poor is mainly brought about. Without this sharing, the poverty of housing and of life, knowledge of the milieu, and even friendship would not suffice. That is why the fact of living by the work of one's hands is an essential element of the Fraternity without which it could not be faithful either to its mission or its spirit."⁸¹

b) It would have been possible to maintain the imitation of the "life of Nazareth" in a cloistered setting of silence and effective withdrawal which would have given it a traditional monastic physiognomy. And that is indeed what Charles de Foucauld tried to achieve for some time. The rules he drafted in 1896 and 1899 prescribed a strict enclosure. His first fraternity in Beni-Abbes had the outline of a wall. But with the years, he abandoned any idea of separation in order to live instead *in close contact with those around him*. That was the second element in the original ideal of religious life as conceived by Brother Charles of Jesus, in imitation of Nazareth.

On multiple occasions, Fr. Voillaume affirmed that this presence in the midst of humankind, which characterizes the life of the fraternities, can only be understood if it has the apostolate as its finality, taking this however in the broadest sense of the term which could include the particular form in which the apostolate of the Little Brothers has developed.

But that is a theme on which Fr. Voillaume has not always maintained the same position: Can the *contacts* with people implied by the "life of Nazareth" be justified uniquely by their rapport with the *silent apostolate* of the fraternities that we talked about earlier? (*Au cœur des masses*, p. 28-31, p.191, p.200-205 goes in this direction, as does *Histoire 10*, p.557-561, and p.608-609).

Or else are they an integral part of their contemplative life, even giving it its proper configuration, the apostolate being in this case simply the fruit radiated by this contemplative life itself. In favor of this last position, we find the following text of R. Voillaume:

"Contact with people, in the spirit of Nazareth and the Visitation [...] is an integral part of our prayer life. We must not imagine them to be more or less tolerated moments of dispersion and dissipation of an interior life otherwise painfully accumulated in moments of silence and prayer. No, these contacts, obviously enlivened by our union with Christ, must in turn become sources of nourishment for our lives of self-offering and union with Christ."⁸²

Relationships with people are necessary "for the *very truth of a contemplative life* which has Christ with all his members as the very goal of its union with the whole Christ. And this life wants to be a real participation in the sufferings of the Head and the members of this great Mystical Body."⁸³

Contact with people "must never have an explicit apostolate as goal. To represent our presence in the midst of people and our sort of life as a *method of apostolate* would distort everything. We must never seek to convert and even less to organize our activities in view of winning souls and drawing them to us. If our life is an apostolate, it is because it is entirely the result of a lived union with Jesus [...] who lives in his brothers and sisters."⁸⁴

In spite of that, in *El Abiodh Sidi Cheikh*, his historical study of the Little Brothers of Jesus, Fr. Voillaume pointed out the risk of conceiving the ideal of "Nazareth" by accenting the

⁸¹ RV, *Règle de vie des Petits Frères de Jésus*, 1962, p. 324-325.

⁸² RV, *Au cœur des masses*, 1^{ère} édition, p. 192.

⁸³ *Ibid.* p. 199.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

absolute gratuitousness of contemplation without considering its apostolic ends. This could lead some to a certain narrowness in the way of understanding their relationships with people.⁸⁵

Finally, concerning these two constitutive elements of the “life of Nazareth” (poverty– work and *contacts*), it must be added that they not only specify the form the contemplative life of the fraternities takes on, but they are also determinative in the decision to form *small communities*, which also characterizes the physiognomy of the congregation. On this subject, R. Voillaume recalled that Brother Charles of Jesus “came back to his first idea of *small groups*, not only because this allows greater poverty, but also – and this is the fruit of his experience during his final years – because it allows for greater closeness to the people, more mixed in with them while also multiplying the contact points.”⁸⁶

Nazareth and the contemplative life of the fraternities

In traditional monastic orders, its members prepare themselves for contemplative prayer by the path of solitude, seclusion, and silence. Fr. Voillaume considered *this form of prayer* as not representing all modes of prayer nor exhausting the subject. At any rate, it does not seem to be the form that the Little Brothers of Jesus are usually called to practice. “The Little Brothers are vowed, by their very state of life, to [...] a true and authentic prayer, but which in them does not take on the same form as the prayer of cloistered religious.”⁸⁷ Their prayer does not unfold in the same setting of life, and the conditions of its exercise are radically different. The prayer of the Little Brothers often exists in the midst of fatigue, suffering, and the difficulties of a life of poverty with its occasional knocks and disruptions.

“The Little Brothers of Jesus for their part are called to live an endeavor of prayer and faith which will sometimes arise out of the suffering of their own lives but more often perhaps out of their full communion with the physical and moral misery of those around them.

Their insertion in suffering humanity is quite connected to the outpouring of their prayer and there must not be an issue for them of a certain dosage. [...] So don’t be surprised, Little Brother, to discover that your prayer often must take the form of an increasing sorrow, an obscure expectation, or an unsatisfied thirst held out to Jesus Savior. [...] The Holy Spirit will work in your heart and it is good for you to know in what direction He will lead you, so as not to get in the way of his action in you, and so that you are at home with this kind of prayer.”⁸⁸

This particular form of contemplative life that the Little Brothers lead, “thrown into the world and the misery of the world,”⁸⁹ corresponds to the ideal of religious life that Charles de Foucauld conceived of “in following the example of Nazareth.”

“In this original intuition of Charles de Foucauld, is it simply a question of a contemplative life led in the midst of people, especially among the poor and in the sharing of their laborious conditions of existence, without the very nature of this contemplative life and the attitude of heart and spirit it implies in our relationships with others being fundamentally different from that implied by a contemplative life led in the desert? Or, on a deeper level, is it question of a new type of contemplative life in which contemplation itself, centered on the Heart of Christ, opens out onto the mystery of loving humankind, contemplated in its divine source and incarnated concretely in actual friendship? [...] The life of Nazareth thus conceived is more than a simple

⁸⁵ Cf. RV, *Histoire 10*, p. 608-609.

⁸⁶ RV, *Au cœur des masses*, p. 28.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁸⁸ RV, *Au cœur des masses*, p. 97-99.

⁸⁹ J et R. MARITAIN, *Liturgie et Contemplation*, dans *Œuvres complètes XIV*, Éditions universitaires, Fribourg Suisse/ Éditions Saint-Paul Paris, 1993, p. 139.

exterior form of life: it has requirements that are deep and proper to itself. This intuition of Brother Charles is at the foundation of the religious life of the fraternities of the Little Brothers of Jesus, but it also concerns in an essential way the fraternities of the Gospel.”⁹⁰

“Nazareth,” therefore, thus presented, seems to express the contemplative life of the fraternities not only in what concerns their exterior context of life – already original – but furthermore in what concerns the paths of their contemplative prayer.

The “mystery of Christ, which is connected to the life and destiny of humankind as to that of each person, [...] is at the basis of the mystery of Nazareth and confers its nature, its gradual development, and its own expressions on the contemplation of the disciples of Charles de Foucauld. [...] For every disciple of Brother Charles, whether the Little Brothers of Jesus or the Little Brothers of the Gospel, this mysterious identification between Jesus and humankind becomes an object of contemplation in the heart of Christ. [...] Precisely because of that, the contemplative life of the Little Brothers of Jesus implies by its very nature the fact of sharing the human condition in its existential reality. [...] It is the very character of this contemplation to be expressed through the ordinary reality of human life that it embraces with a love that is always the love of Jesus.”⁹¹

The experience of the Little Brothers themselves likewise confirms this: “The imitation of Jesus in the mystery of Nazareth offers its own ‘means’ of contemplative life and, even more, its own paths of contemplative prayer. One brother affirms that quite quickly they had the lived certitude that the ‘life of Nazareth,’ *as and wherever* they led it, was most often a stimulus for them in the ‘prayer of the poor.’”⁹²

The Little Brothers themselves, however, recognize the *ambivalence* that the “life of Nazareth” poses when considered in its human conditionings: “Our hiddenness in the world [...] can be enriching, stimulating, an opportunity to go beyond ourselves, or to the contrary, an occasion of discouragement or loss of enthusiasm in our striving for God. In this domain there is nothing automatic: this hiddenness is not a means to prayer but rather the material, the pathway, and the invitation for our life of prayer.”⁹³

They also point out that their prayer and their life of union with God does not remain indifferent to the realities that more or less deeply mark their daily existence - on one hand, salaried manual work and confrontation with misery and unemployment, and on the other hand, encountering the great non-Christian religions or a disconcerting doctrinal relativism. “In looking at our theological life, all these human or religious realities which resound in us remain ambivalent. They can either stimulate or inhibit our life of union with God.”⁹⁴

They note the same thing in speaking of the “crowding in” by people around them that they incur in their life. This invasion can be an invitation to self-detachment or the stripping of self just as it can be an occasion of dispersion or of self-seeking in a multiplicity of “contacts.”

This is why the Little Brothers themselves draw attention to the necessity of a *discernment* so that the activities and the realities that make up the “life of Nazareth” can really nourish their life of union with God:

“These activities must be the subject of a discernment carried out in the light of a living faith, and within the very fabric of our daily life which seems –or could seem– to do more or less

⁹⁰ RV, *Lettre aux fraternités de l'Évangile*; Béni-Abbès, Oct 15, 1970, a mimeographed text, p.17.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* p. 19-20.

⁹² UN PICCOLO FRATELLO DI GESÙ, *I Piccoli Fratelli di Gesù del Padre de Foucauld*, « Vita Consacrata » 22, 1986, p. 508

⁹³ PETITS FRERES DE JESUS, *Chapitre Général 1966, Rapport d'Ollières*, p. 15.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 18.

violence to our desire for union with God. It is only at this price that they must and can be integrated into the movement that unifies and pacifies our religious life in a gift to our Beloved Lord and Brother Jesus. Paraphrasing Saint Paul, we could say that in order to unite ourselves with God, there is still, in our very life of Nazareth, ‘the work of our faith, the labor of our love, and the steadfastness of our hope in Our Lord Jesus Christ, before our God and Father’ (1Thes. 1:3).”⁹⁵

In spite of all that has been experienced by the Little Brothers and affirmed by Fr. Voillaume in the texts quoted above on the value of the “life of Nazareth”, not only as the exterior context of their religious life but also as the source of a particular kind of contemplative life, we must acknowledge that, on more than one occasion, we see the same Rene Voillaume reversing his steps on the path he had taken in this direction. It is especially surprising to note in the conclusion to *El Abiodh Sidi Cheikh*, when he takes up again the essential characteristics of the founding charism, he chose to omit speaking of “Nazareth”, considering that “this term lends itself to numerous interpretations [...] being equally the prerogative of all the disciples of Brother Charles.”⁹⁶

The distancing of R. Voillaume in regards to “Nazareth” probably reflects the concerns it caused him on more than one occasion when some Little Brothers of Jesus or of the Gospel interpreted the imitation of the life of Nazareth inaccurately.

The theme of “Nazareth” is thus one of those that underwent the most fluctuations in the thought of Fr. Voillaume. It is perhaps here that the price of his own physical distancing from the fraternities, beginning in the 60’s, is most clearly paid. It seems in fact that the experience of the years affirmed the Little Brothers in their placing of value on the potentialities contained in “the life of Nazareth” for their own contemplative life; while in Rene Voillaume we see periods of great conviction followed by periods of hesitation or retraction.

–The prayer of the poor.

“Our prayer must be that of poor people, of those who toil and suffer.”⁹⁷

One of the principal objections usually made to the way of life of the fraternities was that the fatigue, noise, and dullness caused by heavy and prolonged physical exertion took away any possibility to carry out an authentic life of prayer. The Little Brothers themselves, moreover, acknowledged that during the hour of prayer they felt incapable, most of the time, of meditating and thinking. However their experience was that God was pushing them towards an ever more complete participation in the lot of the poor and, at the same time, towards an authentic life of prayer. The whole question was, therefore, to know if *another way* could be offered them for advancing towards union with God in prayer.

“Are those whose conditions of life prevent them from meditating also prevented by these conditions from praying? Is not prayer above and beyond thinking? The poor are unable to meditate. They don’t have the head for that nor the culture required. They don’t know the methods of meditation or else are too tired. Sharing the life of workers, you must also share their way of praying. You neither have the head for meditating when you come home, your wits dulled by the noise of the machines at the factory, worn out by the work deep down in a mine, dazed by the long hours of work in the sun as a farmhand, heavy headed from the

⁹⁵ PETITS FRERES DE JESUS, *Chapitre Général 1966, Compte-rendu 2*, p. 5.

⁹⁶ RV, *Histoire 10*, p.932.

⁹⁷ RV, *Au cœur des masses*, p. 111.

intoxicating chemical fumes at the synthetics factory, or weary and sleepy after days of fishing out at sea. You are not able to meditate.”⁹⁸

“We must not want to take another path than the one God offers us. We must pray as we can and not worry about trying to pray as we cannot. I don’t want to say that meditation doesn’t have its role [...]. I only want to say that meditation is not prayer, it isn’t even essential as a preparation for prayer *when the circumstances, independent from our will, oblige us to take another way*. Because there is another way.”⁹⁹

Fr. Voillaume thus proposed to his Little Brothers to take a path that is barer and more adapted to the physical and psychological conditions into which the poor and laborious life of Nazareth thrusts them, with the assurance that “for poor people, God must accept this reduced itinerary.”¹⁰⁰

“By dint of persevering courage and by simple and naked acts of faith and love, you could place yourself there before God and just wait, opening up to him the very depths of your being just as they are, waiting for his coming in one’s desires but especially in the feeling of helplessness, misery, and cowardice. The result will often be a prayer that is painful, heavy, and not very spiritual in appearance.”¹⁰¹

“It is a question of just being present before God, not with one’s thoughts, imagination, or feelings, as they will manage to wander elsewhere, but by the constantly readjusted desire of your will. Sometimes the only way in your power to express your will, however real, will be to remain physically present, on your knees, at the foot of the tabernacle. And that will be enough. This silent longing of your being for God, if it is authentic, is infinitely more than meditation or reading. [...] Don’t be afraid to accept this emptiness of thought and feeling, provided that it was not artificially brought on by your efforts and provided that you fill this emptiness with silent, courageous, and perhaps sorrowful, in any case obscure, waiting for the divine to come and visit you.”¹⁰²

R. Voillaume added that the Little Brothers must not fear losing their way on this path, on the condition that they *persevere in it*. That is the only condition and it is essential. And he recalls that if we gather together all of Jesus’ teachings on prayer, we really only find one recommendation: *perseverance*. We often forget that this recommendation demonstrates precisely that God proposes to do the rest.”¹⁰³

“The conviction you must have in the depths of your heart is believing that this path is good, that it is a shortcut leading to union in faith, and that God will come and pray in you without your knowing it. We don’t believe that enough, and that’s why we don’t manage to get used to the idea of a formless kind of prayer.”¹⁰⁴

–Nazareth and the desert.

If then Fr. Voillaume encouraged the Little Brothers to persevere in the way of poor people, he was quite conscious of the risks proper to their way of life. Fatigue, mental numbness, agitation, and continual noise can at length trouble the interior silence of one’s heart. That is

⁹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 121.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 120.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.* p. 124.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.* p. 121-122.

¹⁰² *Ibid.* p. 126-127.

¹⁰³ Cf. *Ibid.* p. 124.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.* p. 122. Cf. RV, *Règle de vie des Petits Frères de Jésus*, 1962, p. 62, 93. On this theme of *the prayer of the poor*, you can also refer to RV, *La prière dans la vie*, « Jesus Caritas » n°84 (1951), p. 3-15.

why he judged it indispensable that the Little Brothers take time, at regular intervals, to reflect on their faith, the Gospel, and themselves, so as not to be fooled by their own interior dispositions.

“Inspired by the contemplation of Christ in Nazareth, the disciples of Charles de Foucauld choose as the context and material of their contemplative religious life a certain sharing of the work and conditions of life of the poor, thus exposing themselves to being deprived on an almost regular basis, of a minimum of silence, freedom of spirit, and time consecrated to prolonged prayer, all things generally considered to be the privileged if not indispensable means of contemplative prayer. However the Little Brothers *do not contest the value of these means*. They even feel the urgent need to come back to them at periodic intervals, even stressing their spiritual importance. These moments of renewal are marked in an absolute way by silence, solitude, and the distancing and detachment proper to the desert.”¹⁰⁵

During the 50’s, in response to certain expectations arising among the brothers, the letters of Fr. Voillaume reinforced the spirit and practice of the *desert* in the Fraternity, traditional observances of contemplative life.

At the beginning, the accent was put on keeping Sunday holy and on the monthly and yearly retreats. Then other practices were included like the forty days of solitude before final vows or the setting up of a hermitage not too far from each fraternity. Following the 1966 General Chapter, they inaugurated the “desert year” that the brothers would take ten years after leaving the studies fraternity.

The long letter, *The Path of Prayer*, in the first volume of *Lettres aux fraternités*, is, on the other hand, a clear proof of this orientation to which we alluded above. It was written at the end of 1958 in response to a general consultation in which the Little Brothers presented their questions concerning prayer and the difficulties they encountered in being faithful to it. Several years had gone by since Rene Voillaume had written *The Prayer of the Poor*. After this time of further experience, but without at all wanting to contradict what had been written before, this new letter showed the effort made to better incorporate the traditional *means* of union with God, while adapting them to the particular situation of the fraternities.¹⁰⁶

The 1966 and 1972 General Chapters again brought up the concern of the Little Brothers to continue this research more extensively.

Moreover, on numerous occasions, R. Voillaume insisted on the necessity of gradually acquiring a *rhythm of alternating* between the usual life of “Nazareth” and sojourns in the desert: “We must continually go from the desert to being with people and from being with people to the desert. In the alternating between these styles of life which are exteriorly irreconcilable and opposite, the spiritual unity of the life of Nazareth will gradually take place in us.”¹⁰⁷ In *The Prayer of the Poor*, he had already pointed out the importance of this:

“It is necessary to understand the significance of this alternating which obliges you to pursue union with God in two diametrically opposed directions. On the one hand, you have your work

¹⁰⁵ RV, *La contemplation dans l’Église d’aujourd’hui*, p. 63-64.

¹⁰⁶ In *Le chemin de la prière*, bringing the two letters together, Fr. Voillaume drew on what he had presented in *The Prayer of the Poor* to point out to the Little Brothers the risk of falling into a state of passivity without learning to pray and without reacting against the exterior difficulties of prayer (cf. *Lettres aux Fraternités I*, p. 199). He even pointed out in another letter that the fact of leading a contemplative life in a life in the midst of people with their worries and sufferings “absolutely presupposes previous formation in the spirit of faith and the acquisition of a *habit of prayer* which is the result of effort made fruitful by the hidden action [...] of the Spirit of Jesus in us.” (*Lettres aux Fraternités II*, p. 263). It is to be noted, too, that in another letter from 1961, where he reflected on the formation in prayer that the Fraternity must furnish to the Little Brothers, he strongly pointed out once again the importance of meditation in this process (cf. *Lettres aux Fraternités III*, p. 51-55).

¹⁰⁷ RV, *Lettres aux fraternités II*, p. 265.

days when, heavy with fatigue and pressed by those who need you, you will be reduced to prayer of that dark, formless and sometimes painful kind whose value for purification and union with God in pure faith you now know. On the other hand, you have your longer periods of withdrawal and silence when, owing to the contrast, you will very likely find yourselves psychologically unprepared, at least at the outset. And this is perfectly normal. You will have to make a spiritual effort at thoughtful reading and deeper reflection on your faith [...].

This constant changing from one kind of life to another acts as a guarantee of the authenticity of your lives as believers. By giving yourselves generously to both these forms of life, one after the other, without ever seeking to run away from the challenges both offer to self-detachment and self-giving, you can avoid the risks inherent in both. And your faith, your prayer, your love of God and people will be safe from illusion.

As regards prayer more especially [...], whether during your hour of adoration at the end of your work day or in the silence of a retreat day, you must always expect that you will be coming to it under conditions that will require a real effort in faith.”¹⁰⁸

To end, the primordial place of the “life of Nazareth” in the life of the fraternities must be emphasized once again. If not we risk to think that this contemplative life is built fundamentally on these “flights” into the desert.

“Let me stress again the value in our life of this experience of work and resulting tiredness as a pathway to union with God. This is not a period during which we live off a supply of spiritual energy accumulated in the course of our retreat times, like a reservoir of water that runs out almost faster than it can be re-filled. Such an idea is radically false. [...] We are quite as much—and sometimes more—open to the sanctifying influence of God’s Spirit in the state of self-emptying brought about by a courageous effort to pray at the end of a long and difficult day as we are, say, in the peaceful rest of a moment of meditative reading at the beginning of a day of silence. Both of these “movements,” however, are required to ensure the growth of our generosity, and the balance of our life for God, beyond the realm of illusion.”¹⁰⁹

3 – “The Adoration of Christ in the Sacrament of the Eucharist”

Charles de Foucauld’s love for the person of Jesus, which after his conversion determined practically all of his attitudes and aspirations, was expressed in his two greatest devotions: the Eucharist and the Gospel. “His prayer,” maintained Fr. Voillaume, “sprang from his faith in the real presence of Jesus. And his meditation, always scriptural, took its form from his devotion to the Word of God contained in the Bible.”¹¹⁰

Following in his footsteps, the Little Brothers would find in the Word of God, and more especially in the Eucharist, the path on which they could meet Jesus and come to resemble him.

The Eucharist in the life of Charles de Foucauld

Ever since his stay in the Holy Land, where he managed to live a hidden life in the small wooden tool shed located in the garden of the Poor Clares (1897-1900), Brother Charles of Jesus remained profoundly marked by his faith in the *real presence* of Christ in the Eucharist. It was under this aspect that the Eucharistic mystery first presented itself to him. He had a great desire to pray in front of the Tabernacle and exposition of the Most Blessed Sacrament was a

¹⁰⁸ RV, *Au cœur des masses*, p. 133-134.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.* p. 135.

¹¹⁰ RV, *La vie de prière du Père de Foucauld*, dans « L’oraison », Paris 1947, p. 103.

source of profound happiness for him. He loved participating in all the Masses celebrated at the monastery.

And, most important of all, in the ideal conception that he had of the “life of Nazareth” the Blessed Sacrament became the primordial element around which everything was organized. It was precisely the *presence of Jesus* in the Blessed Sacrament that rendered the fraternity similar to the true house of Nazareth. We find this crystalized in the 1899 Rule of the Little Brothers of the Sacred Heart which was conceived with this intent in mind.

In his conception of the Eucharistic mystery, Charles de Foucauld was dependent upon the thinking of his time and was marked by the shortcomings proper to the XIXth century. We know that at that time the devotion to and worship of the Blessed Sacrament was not sufficiently connected, theologically and liturgically, to the Eucharistic sacrifice.

Nevertheless, if it is true that the piety of Charles de Foucauld was fed by this spirituality, we will see that it was not limited by it. In fact with time this worship of the Sacred Host gave way to a more integral *Eucharistic life* by its configuration to Christ, offered in sacrifice to the Father and handed over for his brothers and sisters.

We can begin to see this transformation at Beni Abbes, but it was especially manifested when he had to choose between the daily regularity of exposition of the Blessed Sacrament in his hermitage in Beni Abbes and the abandonment of his chapel for several months in order to go in search of the Tuaregs out of the love that pushed him to share their existence. In Tamanrasset, he had to accept being deprived of reserving the Blessed Sacrament for six years because the Apostolic Prefect decided not to grant him that faculty except when there would be other Christians in the vicinity.

Fr. Voillaume expressed as follows what he understood by a *Eucharistic life*:

“Living a Eucharistic life is not simply believing in the mystery and adoring it in the outpourings of intimate devotion or public worship; it is also not simply being content with participation in the divine sacrifice or communion, as that is the duty of every Christian at the very risk of losing their faith. It is being configured to Christ, by dint of love and attracted by a special grace, such as is expressed to us by the Sacrament in its two-fold meaning: an oblation to the Father and offering to humankind as nourishment.”¹¹¹

In this perspective, souls nourished by Eucharistic contemplation are handed over and offered to the Father, as was Jesus in his sacrifice, and given as food to their brothers and sisters, like the Eucharistic bread. Fr. Voillaume observed that, in certain circumstances and in order to develop more fully, such a life can call for the sacrifice of a part of the Eucharistic form of worship which, in relation to it, is only a means.¹¹² He thusly explained that the life of Charles de Foucauld “was unified, unbroken, and despite appearances, not contradictory. [...] It was necessary that there be both the long hours of adoration in Nazareth before the monstrance and the sacramental solitude of Tamanrasset. In Tamanrasset Brother Charles lay down his life for his Tuareg friends and became nourishment for them and an offering to his God. What is specific to the sacrament is that it produces what it signifies: it was necessary that the soul of the hermit of the Hoggar be fully configured to Jesus and to the Host.”¹¹³ “Later, when all was consummated, when the Little Brother of Jesus fell onto the sand, the Holy Host was no longer found in the Tabernacle but lying next to the body of his friend. It was as if God wanted to mark the indissoluble friendship between Jesus in the Eucharist and his servant, even beyond

¹¹¹ RV, *Les Fraternités du Père de Foucauld. Mission et esprit*, p. 97-98.

¹¹² Cf. *Ibid.* p. 98.

¹¹³ *Ibid.* p. 98-99.

death. Of course, this fact is merely symbolic, but it expresses the reality that was the very fabric of his life.”¹¹⁴

Finally we can add that for Charles de Foucauld, his Eucharistic vocation is inseparable from his love of the Sacred Heart and from his desire to participate in his *redemptive work*. “Charles de Foucauld, configured to the Eucharistic Christ through love and to his heart opened on the Cross, had to experience and reproduce in himself the sacrificial offering that redeems. This state of being a victim is the completion and logical result of a Eucharistic life fully lived.”¹¹⁵

The Eucharist in the life of the fraternities

Acknowledging the footprints that Charles de Foucauld has left on the path taken by the fraternities, Fr. Voillaume stated that:

“We cannot imagine following Brother Charles without sharing his love of the Eucharist. At the moment when we leave the solitude of the desert to live amidst the hassles and solicitations of crowds of people, we take the Eucharist with us, not only as a cloister but also as the real presence of Christ in a state of perpetual self-offering and intercession at the heart of our life. The Fraternity is centered on the Eucharist, both concretely and spiritually, both as a sign and the reality of his presence.”¹¹⁶

Just like Charles de Foucauld, the fraternities find the center of their life in the Eucharist. First of all because the path of their prayer usually passes through *Eucharistic* adoration; but also because by participating in this mystery and extending it into their lives, they carry out their vocation to be ‘saviors with Jesus’.

R. Voillaume upheld that the Little Brothers of Jesus have the mission of venerating the presence of the glorious humanity of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and adoring it in the name of the Church and all those for whom they are consecrated.

“Without the Eucharistic presence, your life is no longer an imitation of Nazareth in the way that Brother Charles of Jesus meant it to be. He saw in the Eucharistic presence and daily adoration of the Blessed Sacrament the work proper to and characteristic of the Fraternity. For a Little Brother of Jesus, Eucharistic adoration is certainly not the only form but it is the most important form of prayer and contemplation.”¹¹⁷

“Of course, in order to remain faithful to an exceptional invitation to love, Charles de Foucauld did not hesitate to sacrifice not just the veneration but even the presence of the Blessed Sacrament and the celebration of holy Mass for months at a time. But he did not submit himself to this exceptional predicament without hesitation and suffering and never ceased yearning for the day when it would be accorded to him to once again have this beloved presence from which he had received so much and which had always been for him, literally, the path to the Father. By obedience to our vocation, we too can find ourselves some days having to deprive ourselves of the Mass and sometimes even of the Eucharistic presence. In this case the Lord will supply the graces that ordinarily come to us through the sacrament of the Body of Jesus and through worshipping him in this way. But then we must be desirous, even more than ever, of venerating the body of Christ and receiving it in Communion. [...] The Eucharistic worship is an

¹¹⁴ RV, *Au cœur des masses*, p. 20.

¹¹⁵ RV, *Les Fraternités du Père de Foucauld. Mission et esprit*, p. 102.

¹¹⁶ RV, *Histoire 10*, p.933.

¹¹⁷ RV, *Règle de vie des Petits Frères de Jésus*, 1962, p. 112.

indispensable nourishment and support for our weakness and we must never deprive ourselves of it through negligence or lack of obedience.”¹¹⁸

However, Fr. Voillaume noted that the Eucharistic orientation of the Fraternity must not be confused with the specific vocation of several adoration congregations that appeared during the last two centuries. The Little Brothers of Jesus do not have the mission of assuring solemn and perpetual adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. For them, as for Brother Charles, Eucharistic worship is the sign which expresses their communion at every instance with the redemptive work of Jesus through the means of the prayer and sacrifice of their own lives.

“Our main activity, that which alone justifies our consecration to such an unreasonable form of life as that of a Little Brother, consists in reproducing the passion of Jesus and letting him relive his sufferings in us [...]. We have our share of sufferings and sacrifices to accomplish and communion with the Eucharistic sacrifice should nourish this effort and fortify us in view of not only accepting the cross in our lives but even in going to meet it. [...] The Eucharist is like the link which unites each of us and each of our days, with its share of poor miseries and tiny sufferings, to what happened at the time of the human suffering of Jesus.”¹¹⁹

We thus see that the Little Brothers are called to carry out a Eucharistic life. According to Rene Voillaume, that implied on the one hand the offering of their lives to Christ in union with his sacrifice and for the salvation of humankind. And on the other hand, as the Eucharist is also food, the Little Brothers must abandon themselves to their brothers and sisters, “becoming by their Eucharistic contemplation something ‘usefully consumable,’ nourishment for others.”¹²⁰

Meditative reading of Holy Scripture

Before ending, we must mention the privileged place that Brother Charles of Jesus, and after him the Fraternities, have accorded to Holy Scripture in the development of their contemplative life.

Brother Charles always accompanied his Eucharistic prayer with meditative reading of the Gospel. The need he felt to meditate on Gospel texts – and to do it in writing – corresponds to the burning love he had for the person of Jesus and went hand in hand with the veneration of his Word. We know that he always put a copy of the Holy Scriptures next to the tabernacle – at a time when that was unusual enough for it to be noticed. It was Jesus himself whom he was seeking in the Gospels, desiring to adjust his thoughts, desires, and the whole of his life to his.¹²¹

Fr. Voillaume reminded the Little Brothers that the meditative reading of the Bible, especially the books of the New Testament, had to become the daily bread that nourished their faith. They would find there the knowledge of what God and Jesus Christ really look like and of the path they must follow in order to be like him.

“Meditative reading of the Bible is an indispensable means of disposing yourself to the contemplation of the mysteries of God. You cannot do without it. A life of fervent prayer is impossible without first feeding your spirit, your memory, and your heart through meditation of the word of God.

In order to effectively conform your life to his, meditative reading of Holy Scripture must also imprint in your memory the gestures and teachings of God. You will not progress in understanding the Scriptures, especially the Gospels, if you do not put into practice what you

¹¹⁸ RV, *Lettres aux fraternités I*, p. 217-218.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 63.

¹²⁰ RV, *Les Fraternités du Père de Foucauld. Mission et esprit*, p. 105.

¹²¹ RV, *La vie de prière du Père de Foucauld*, in «L'oraison», Paris 1947, p. 110-111.

have read. It is in living the Gospel, in “doing” it, that it becomes clear, and that you receive a share in the wisdom of God.”¹²²

Conclusion

The experience of this particular kind of contemplative life of the Little Brothers of Jesus found both interpretation and enlightenment in the words and writings of Fr. Voillaume.

The passing years helped to clarify the horizon and paths of the contemplative life of the Fraternities. In this maturation process, hesitations, deficiencies, and rectifications also found their place. We saw that there were even some questions which, in Rene Voillaume’s mind, had not yet been formulated with the needed precision. Nonetheless, it is not difficult to take note of the treasure that this contemplative life in the midst of the world represents for the ecclesial community. Many of the aspirations for a life based on the Gospel which have arisen in our day are reflected in this spirituality.

That’s why many lay persons, priests and religious were attracted to the spiritual experience of the fraternities. Fr. Voillaume pointed out that “without the witness of the fraternities, many Christians would not have believed it possible to achieve a truly contemplative prayer in the ordinary conditions of real life.”¹²³

On multiple occasions Rene Voillaume spoke for these Christians, too. We will take a look at this in the next chapter in which we will lay out his teachings on the development of the contemplative dimension of Christian life.

Chapitre IV

THE CONTEMPLATIVE DIMENSION OF CHRISTIAN LIFE

As we saw in the second chapter, from the 60’s on, Fr. Voillaume was often called upon to address audiences that extended beyond the borders of where the fraternities were located. It was thus a period during which we can find numerous teachings in his publications which treat of Christian prayer but not necessarily connected to the contemplative prayer of the fraternities. To that we must add that, in general, even what he wrote for the Little Brothers and Little Sisters of Jesus (or of the Gospel) – as he himself confirmed – sometimes concerned “as much lay Christian life as religious life.”¹²⁴

¹²² RV, *Règle de vie des Petits Frères de Jésus*, 1962, p. 78.

¹²³ RV, *Lettres aux fraternités I*, p. 316.

¹²⁴ RV, *Laissez-là vos filets*, p.7 ; cf. *Lettres aux fraternités IV*, p. 7.

He even thought that the talks he gave to the Little Brothers and Little Sisters of Jesus before their profession “could be useful to other young people preparing for religious life”¹²⁵ or that they directly concerned “the Christian life of all the baptized.”¹²⁶

So, we would like now to present the teachings Fr. Voillaume left us about prayer and which concern every Christian, no matter his or her specific vocation. We will do so in the context of the contemplative dimension that every Christian life carries within it since baptism, at least in germ.

But we must warn you of the limits of the present chapter. R.Voillaume never pretended to present either an exhaustive or a systematic study of prayer. In general his teachings came as a response to concrete problems that the life of prayer posed to his listeners and readers. Or they were simply an expression of the experience he accumulated by himself or through the fraternities.

That explains why, in his teachings, certain themes which would have been addressed at greater length in a systematic study of prayer, were silently passed over or just evoked. For example, that’s the case with vocal prayer which he rarely mentions and liturgical prayer which he treated just as an aside in several of his writings. It is not a question – may it be quite clear – of a lack of esteem for or of valuing these forms of Christian prayer less. It is simply *from the fact* that our author centered by preference on what in classical terms we know as *mental prayer*– even though this is an unfortunate term.¹²⁷

The readers must keep this clarification in mind as they begin to read this chapter.

1 – Contemplative Dimension of Christian Life

In the third chapter we treated the subject of the contemplative life of the fraternities. In so doing, we spoke of contemplatives, as we said, in the strict sense of the term, designating those called to the life of a religious family recognized by the Church as given to contemplation. Now, on the contrary, our intention is to consider those who, without having received this call to the *contemplative state* of religious life, travel the various *paths of contemplative prayer*.

We know that all those who welcome the grace of contemplation, or even those who resolutely strive to dispose themselves to welcome it by a life of persevering prayer, can likewise be called *contemplatives*. Anyway, on certain occasions, Saint Teresa of Avila (The Way of Perfection, 17:4) and Saint John of the Cross (*Canticle* 1:6) did the same. Fr. Voillaume often referred to *contemplatives* or *contemplative life* in this analogous sense we have alluded to, especially when he was addressing laity and religious of the active life.

It is in this same sense that we must understand the meaning of the *contemplative dimension* and *contemplative vocation* accessible to every Christian.

Christian contemplation

¹²⁵ RV, *Entretiens sur la vie religieuse*, p. 7.

¹²⁶ RV, *L'éternel vivant*, p. 8.

¹²⁷ His own contemplative vocation is evidently not a stranger to this fact. We can add, on the other hand, that Rene Voillaume usually did not speak of *mental prayer* considering that this expression “puts the accent too uniquely on something intellectual.” (RV, *Relations interpersonnelles avec Dieu*, p. 71). He preferred to speak of *interior prayer*, *personal prayer*, or sometimes in a broad sense – as we will see – of *contemplative prayer*.

We will now explore what R. Voillaume meant by *contemplation*, completing what was said about this in the third chapter,

First of all he broached the understanding of this term by considering what it means on the natural level:

“To contemplate something is to stop and look at it, not just in passing but with a certain insistence [...]. In philosophy, we speak of the contemplation of the beautiful, the true, and the good. These are realities that by themselves directly capture the eyes of the intellect, without the intervention of reason. In contemplation there is, in fact, the idea of a certain direct seizing of the object contemplated. The act of contemplation, therefore, stops at the object for itself and not in view of something else. [...] We cannot help seeing in this a kind of nuance of admiring absorption. Contemplation has something gratuitous about it. We don’t contemplate something for its usefulness to us. That’s why, when what is contemplated is in itself truth, beauty and goodness, there is a direct link and like a mutual dependence between contemplation and love. Love pushes us to contemplate the one loved and this contemplation increases our love.”¹²⁸

After having affirmed in this first approach the ability of the human spirit to penetrate reality in a contemplative way, we now come to the significance this disposition of soul acquires when it is *supernaturally elevated* and intended for God:

“In the traditional teaching of the Church, the term contemplation designates a certain aptitude of the human intellect, fortified by faith, to be able to rise from here below, from the earthly condition of the spirit, to a certain experience of and rather simple and penetrating knowledge of God Trinity, not by one’s own strength but with the help of and in the very movement of the Holy Spirit. This experience is savory, obscure, and most often inexpressible but remains none the less in the order of knowledge, in the light of faith and of the Holy Spirit. This experience is so linked with charity in its very act that Saint John of the Cross was able to define it as: ‘A science of love or an infused and loving knowledge of God and at the same time it enlightens the soul and embraces it with love in order to lift it from degree to degree up to God its Creator’ (*The Dark Night*, II:18).”¹²⁹

Fr. Voillaume added that the act of contemplation “is lived out in a simpler way than described.”¹³⁰ Many Christians, who would not only be unable to express but even to understand what has been said here, perhaps actually receive these graces of contemplation through which they acquire what is designated as *a sense for the things of God*.¹³¹

He also reminded that the use of the word *contemplative* has at times been questioned by some who have gone so far as to negate the specifically Christian value of the reality designated by this name, denouncing the influence of a conception of the universe specific to a questionable philosophical system that existed before Christianity. To which R. Voillaume responded that “even if the term *contemplation* did not have a Christian origin, it has taken on a very precise meaning in theological language and designates a reality that remains essentially unchanged throughout the history of spirituality.”¹³²

Let us not forget either that in Christianity “contemplation was a lived experience before being called by this name.”¹³³ “If we look at the fact as a whole, the testimony of these

¹²⁸ RV, *La contemplation, élément essentiel de toute vie chrétienne*, p. 160-161.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.* p. 163.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ Cf. *Ibid.*

¹³² RV, *La contemplation dans l’Église d’aujourd’hui*, p. 43.

¹³³ *Ibid.* p. 41.

thousands of witnesses of contemplative prayer who have succeeded one another ever since the first Pentecost right up until today, remains an authentic supernatural fact. It is a reality, an uncontested fact of the life of the Church, and this fact attests that Christ can be known and loved as the companion, the friend, the God of each of us.”¹³⁴

Hence, “centuries of teaching and experience [have] led the Church to give this term a specifically evangelical and Christian value.”¹³⁵

Christian life and contemplation

Persuaded of the value of this expression and of the reality it designates, it thus remains to accept that contemplation presents itself as a path accessible to every Christian:

“But”, some will say, “are not these contemplatives exceptional beings and what rapport can be established between their experience, admitting that it is genuine, and Christian life as it is proposed to all Christians [...]?”¹³⁶

While acknowledging that not all are called to the same degree of contemplative union with the Lord, R. Voillaume affirmed however that “All Christians here below are called to a minimum of this loving knowledge of God, in the light of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, without which they would be incapable of praying, of loving the Lord, and of living according to the Gospel.”¹³⁷

Of course he recognized that the testimony of contemplatives often came from exceptional personalities. But he added that “these exceptional vocations merely push to an extreme what every Christian is called to live”¹³⁸ because the grace of contemplation is “offered to every Christian just by the fact of having been baptized.”¹³⁹

“Why would the Lord have infused the gifts of the Holy Spirit into the soul of every baptized person (for there is no exception) if not so that they are developed in one’s actions through the graces of contemplation? Otherwise these gifts have no meaning and are useless. [...] It can be said that in every Christian there is a kind of network of these gifts waiting to be developed. And if the Lord placed it there, then he surely expects and considers it normal that Christians develop in this way.”¹⁴⁰

–Influence of contemplation on Christian life.

¹³⁴ RV, *La vie religieuse dans le monde actuel*, Ottawa 1970, p. 119

¹³⁵ RV, *La contemplation, élément essentiel de toute vie chrétienne*, p. 163.

¹³⁶ RV, *La contemplation dans l’Église d’aujourd’hui*, p. 46.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

In referring to persons called to the religious life or priesthood, Fr. Voillaume was just as clear: “If every religious is not called to embrace a *form* of contemplative life, every religious is on the contrary obligated to a minimum of contemplation without which the ultimate purpose of his or her religious consecration will cease to have any personal meaning. Without this minimum of contemplation, such a life would no longer even be possible. It would lose its meaning.” (*Relations interpersonnelles avec Dieu*, p. 12). “I think we can say that by the very fact that a soul is called to religious life or to the priesthood, he or she is also by that very fact called to a minimum of contemplative life and intimate friendship with Christ. In fact, without a minimum of contemplative life, how can we fully understand the teachings of Jesus on the beatitudes and and be capable of putting them into practice?” (*Ibid.* p. 48). (In the text that we have just reproduced, we can notice the improper use –as we have already pointed out – that R. Voillaume sometimes makes of the expression *contemplative life*. It is thus in this improper sense that we are to understand it.)

¹³⁸ RV, *Où est votre foi ?*, p. 136.

¹³⁹ RV, *Relations interpersonnelles avec Dieu*, p. 85.

¹⁴⁰ RV, *Retraite de la Fraternité Séculière. IV-Nazareth*, p. 6.

a) Fr. Voillaume assured us that there is an intimate knowledge of God, a kind of intuition of the divine being, which goes much further than what we can attain by our own effort of reflection, our imagination, or a theological synthesis. It has to do with “a sort of knowledge that only God can give, and most often it is in prayer that he gives it.”¹⁴¹ And so it is with Christian contemplation.

“We begin to participate in the view that Jesus, Son of God by nature, has of his Father, seeing him as Jesus sees him. From the moment that we become his sons and daughters by adoption, from the moment we receive the grace of divine filiation, this grace must normally open out into an intimate knowledge of the Father. Besides, does not the Beatific Vision, which is the one and only destiny presented to us as the goal of our lives, presuppose that today’s life is already oriented in that direction and that there is already here below a certain beginning of intimate knowledge of God?”¹⁴²

b) But Christian contemplation affects not only our way of entering into relationship with God but also our contacts with humankind and the whole of reality. In fact, by means of contemplation, in addition to sharing in the intimate knowledge of the Father through Christ, we acquire, from the very heart of Jesus, a different way of seeing humankind: contemplation “alone allows us to love others as God loves them.”¹⁴³

“If the condition of human life in our times requires such an effort for us to figure out how to translate our love to humankind, this effort must be accompanied by an equal deepening of the contemplative part of ourselves, without which our loving would not achieve this perfect unity with the divine loving. Without this rooting in the very love we bear for God and for Christ, our love for our brothers and sisters will no longer be what it should be. There, too, a progress in depth is manifested in the very life of religious and of all Christians. We will not know how to love humankind perfectly without a minimum of posing our contemplative eyes on God who alone can allow us this increase in the divine quality of our love. Without this these numerous exterior accomplishments would be no more than a body without a soul.”¹⁴⁴

R. Voillaume added that: “Love cannot be the sign among humankind for recognizing the disciples of Christ and the meeting place with God unless this love bears the mark of the divine in its very manifestations.

For those who neglect or reject the illumination of contemplation, or who no longer dare to affirm their faith as a knowledge of God, the temptation exists to deliberately reduce the sign of God to the testimony of a love even deprived of a divine perspective.”¹⁴⁵

With regard to the influence that Christian contemplation could have on the construction of history and the transformation of the present world, Fr. Voillaume even put forward the following:

“Far from weakening the momentum towards the edification of this city, the hope which surpasses this world is indispensable to it by virtue of some mysterious paradox. If we do not look beyond time to the city that remains eternally, we are in fact incapable of bringing to the construction of our own city this spirit which alone can render it fully human. Without the reflection of this eternal city, the city here below becomes uninhabitable. Every human being carries within, more or less consciously, a contemplative dimension which cannot be denied

¹⁴¹ RV, *Relations interpersonnelles avec Dieu*, p. 73.

¹⁴² RV, *Retraite de la Fraternité Séculière. IV-Nazareth*, p. 5.

¹⁴³ RV, *La contemplation dans l'Église d'aujourd'hui*, p. 67.

¹⁴⁴ RV, *Relations interpersonnelles avec Dieu*, p. 37.

¹⁴⁵ RV, *De l'importance de la contemplation des réalités divines*, p. 13-14

without condemning himself or herself to misfortune and probably to despair. Contemplatives are, on this earth, the privileged witnesses of this transcendent dimension of humanity.”¹⁴⁶

“Without the contemplation of the Word of God made man, it is probably impossible for humankind, especially in the current situation of the world, to achieve this quality of respect for the human person without which there is no peace or true justice in love.”¹⁴⁷

“The person of faith whose way of seeing has been refined by the frequentation of the divine mystery is, more than another, apt to understand human persons in their totality and thus to really love them. And this has consequences even for the construction of the earthly city.”¹⁴⁸

c) Finally, R. Voillaume was aware that contemplative prayer, besides the fact that it introduces us into a different kind of knowledge, or better still, into a new wisdom about God and humankind, gives us access to a knowledge of ourselves that we would not otherwise attain:

“It must be said that, without prayer, there is a certain knowledge of oneself that cannot be attained. [...] Insofar as prayer is authentic, it leads us to a knowledge of ourselves that is indispensable for our being in the truth before God. I do not think that we can acquire such a knowledge of self outside of prayer. Of course, we can experience our weakness in our actions; we do experience our weakness in exercising charity; we discover our shortcomings and we can achieve a certain degree of humility. But there is a depth we cannot reach, a certain insight which cannot be given to us except in the light of the Holy Spirit, and that is not found in our actions. [...] The consequence of this is that there is a sharpness of conscience that we cannot acquire except by this intimate contact with the Lord. And this refinement of our conscience leads us to the perfection of charity.”¹⁴⁹

We thus see how true contemplation, far from isolating us in a posture of escape from reality, is full of implications and consequences for the very life of the Christian. Contemplation gives rise to many attitudes that are at the origin of a new way of thinking, feeling, and acting. Contemplative union with the Lord “makes us react spontaneously in front of things and people as Christ would react: it is a light which enlightens intentions. Of course, we are not perfect, but in the long run we are inclined to take on a certain habit of judging as the Lord would judge. At least we possess in ourselves the light necessary to react before others in perfect charity, and to judge others and things according to their relation to the supernatural end instituted by God. And this way of seeing and feeling must become a habit in the very depths of our being. Then we will experience our faults, our lack of charity, and our selfishness more keenly: we will experience them at the very moment as a breach of this light which is in us like a perpetual vigil light. It is difficult to define this union with God that comes with contemplation. It is a union that lasts all day long, which seems very fragile and yet gives such great freedom to the soul, that freedom which alone allows us to turn towards humankind without turning away from God.”¹⁵⁰

—Christian spirituality and its evolution in relation to contemplation.

According to Rene Voillaume, the constant evolution of spirituality in the Church seems to go in the direction of an ever more universal diffusion of spiritual values which in the beginning were the patrimony of just a few. The attainment of a certain degree of union with God through

¹⁴⁶ RV, *La contemplation dans l'Église d'aujourd'hui*, p. 54.

¹⁴⁷ RV, *La contemplation, élément essentiel de toute vie chrétienne*, p. 167.

¹⁴⁸ RV, *La contemplation dans l'Église d'aujourd'hui*, p. 54 ; cf. Concile Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes* n°22.

¹⁴⁹ RV, *Relations interpersonnelles avec Dieu*, p. 74.

¹⁵⁰ RV, *Des rapports entre la vie active et la vie contemplative*, p. 768.

the practice of prayer seemed more or less reserved to monks, and later to religious and clergy. But it has since appeared as an ideal accessible to all generous Christians, regardless of their state of life.

At the time when religious life left the cloister with the mendicant orders and penetrated the activities of the apostolic life with Saint Ignatius, the birth of the third-orders placed evangelical perfection within the reach of the laity. And Saint Francis de Sales opened the ways of prayer and of intimate union with God to devout persons in the midst of the agitation of the world. Charles de Foucauld and the fraternities were situated in this same line of the evolution of spirituality, and we can affirm that their contribution in this direction was significant.

Stopping to look at the value of what the fraternities experienced over the years, R. Voillaume considered that one of the most important aspects of the message they had to offer was “not only the affirmation of the possibility of a life of friendship with Jesus Christ – a friendship based on contemplative prayer – but also that such intimacy can be sought and reached, for those called to it by God, in the most diverse situations and states of life.”¹⁵¹

He also assured us that today we are at a stage of evolution in the life of the Church that will result in an ever more conscious and universal integration of contemplation into the lives of Christians.

“We cannot doubt, and today less than ever, that such acts [of contemplation] belong to the perfection of the Christian life to which all baptized are called. The very evolution of the forms of religious life and of the states of consecration in the Church tend to prove that contemplation, in their experience of it, can be pursued not only in the Institutes entirely devoted to contemplative life but also in other forms of religious life that are mingled with the world, or in secular institutes, and even within the temporal activities of secular life, provided that the essential conditions for an authentic Christian life are respected.”¹⁵²

On the other hand, the development of this *contemplative dimension of Christian life* presupposes not only the action of the Holy Spirit in the secret of hearts but also, for our part, walking perseveringly on the *path of prayer*. And that path has its own laws and requirements. We shall now take a look at the teachings Father Voillaume has left us on this subject.

2 – The Path of Prayer

Rene Voillaume maintained that the primary purpose of the practice of Christian prayer is “to predispose us to receiving this light [of contemplation], to awaken a desire for it, to ask for it, and to attract it to us in some way.”¹⁵³

We will begin by looking at how he defined prayer so that we can then address the considerations he made for putting it into practice.

“Thinking of God while loving him”

Fr. Voillaume specified above all that, like all superior realities that touch both God and the deepest part of ourselves at the same time, prayer escapes a definition that expresses and

¹⁵¹ RV, *Relations interpersonnelles avec Dieu*, p. 47-48.

¹⁵² RV, *La contemplation, élément essentiel de toute vie chrétienne*, p. 163.

¹⁵³ RV, *Relations interpersonnelles avec Dieu*, p. 74.

exhausts all its richness. We can add that the proof of that is in the numerous definitions given it throughout all of history.

This said, R. Voillaume proposed a definition he always came back to. It came from Charles de Foucauld and he made it his own considering it to be “the best definition of prayer, and also the most complete and most accessible to everyone: “Praying is thinking of God while loving him.”¹⁵⁴

Starting with that, he affirmed that if prayer is, on the theological plane, the act par excellence of encounter with God, then this act necessarily entails the exercise of those faculties in us which are the best reflection of the divine image: the intellect and the will. The definition formulated above adequately expresses this simultaneous activity of knowing and loving, for “there is no prayer if one of these two elements is missing.”¹⁵⁵

“Thinking of God without loving him at the same time, the same moment, is not praying: it is reflecting or meditating. Those who are studying theology, even if they are in the state of grace and have a great love of the Lord, are not praying in studying the things of God: it is a very high activity of thought, but it is not a prayer. But if during their studies they are seized by a great movement of love at the sight of God’s beauty, then at that moment there is prayer.”¹⁵⁶

He then added:

“In the same way, when we do something, driven by the love of God but without our thoughts turned towards him, this is not prayer; it is charity being lived out, which is not the same. [...] But if, in the midst of [these] activities, the thought of God or of Christ comes [to someone], then he or she is praying.

This must be clearly seen, for there is a certain tendency at the present time to let oneself be drawn into a certain confusion in this matter because of the greater importance that we are inclined to give to activity. And we have a tendency to say: ‘My whole life is a prayer; so I don’t need to devote specific moments to it.’ This can be partially true, as we will point out later, but at the basis of this belief there is an inaccuracy about the nature of prayer which could have detrimental consequences.”¹⁵⁷

The intimate union with God, to which the Christian can be introduced by Christ, is ultimately a union of love, but a love which cannot exist without a certain degree of knowledge of all that makes the beloved worthy of our love. On the other hand, it must be affirmed that “the need and the desire to know Christ is one of the first signs of true love.”¹⁵⁸

Thus Fr. Voillaume concluded that in prayer, “knowledge and love continually pursue each other and take turns overtaking each other, if I can dare to say so.”¹⁵⁹

“This circle of life, which is self-sufficient and ends in God, is the most authentic image of Trinitarian life in us, besides which it is like a flowing of grace into our being. It constitutes our whole life of relationship with God and is why the theological virtues have this as their final purpose in regard to the other virtues. And we also understand why those who want to live true lives of prayer commit their whole life and their whole being to this enterprise.”¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁴ RV, *Retraite au Vatican*, p. 73

¹⁵⁵ RV, *Relations interpersonnelles avec Dieu*, p. 72.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

¹⁶⁰ RV, *Les exigences de la vie d’oraison*, an unpublished commentary on the Constitutions, October 23, 1942, p.50.

Prayer and knowledge

–Faith, knowledge and prayer

In prayer, said Rene Voillaume, “we learn to know God and to love him better. And even when the knowledge is obscure and not apparent, it is nevertheless always there as an invisible path by way of which love passes.”¹⁶¹

But, he added, it can be verified that “a fairly general trend exists to neglect this *search for the knowledge of God* without which there can be no prayer. Is not this negligence the cause of this “confused” state that many complain about but also with the feeling of being partly responsible for? In these conditions, is it not normal that the hour of adoration at the feet of the crucified Christ seems more and more difficult? [...] It’s true that prayer has this aspect of sacrifice, but it is not only that. In the long run, if these courageous acts of pure loss of self are not sustained by a constantly renewed knowledge of Jesus in a loving quest for faith, they will lead us to discouragement.”¹⁶²

On the other hand, he noted that, in our times and for many Christians, faith itself frequently appears as an existential attitude of trust in God, of abandonment to him, and of surrendering in love in the midst of the darkness. This may respond to a happy revalorization of the personal and existential dimension of the Christian faith, but we must avoid stripping it of its dimension of knowledge.

This is why he warned about the danger of making the faith “an irrational attitude in which we no longer see very clearly the workings of the intellect in the grasping of an absolute truth, a grasping that is certainly obscure but real.”¹⁶³

R. Voillaume thought that there are numerous Christians who live the Gospel values with a generosity that is very often heroic but as if the intelligible content of their faith did not matter. That has implications regarding prayer:

“We no longer know very well, then, what the word ‘contemplate’ means, for when the intellect has lost the notion of an objective, revealed, and intelligible truth, faith risks to be conceived and experienced as a sort of “fideism,” a sort of blind movement of love. That’s why many no longer know whether the contemplative life [of prayer] is possible here below or not, what it means, nor whether it can still have some value for Christian life.”¹⁶⁴

That’s why he affirmed that Christian contemplation “presupposes that a relationship of knowledge and friendship can be established between man and a God revealing himself as personal.”¹⁶⁵

And he added:

“It is therefore inevitable that the interpretation of such a state and the value attributed to it depend on the conception we have of human intelligence and the reality of knowledge.”¹⁶⁶

¹⁶¹ RV, *Lettres aux fraternités I*, p. 169.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 170-171.

¹⁶³ RV, *La contemplation, élément essentiel de toute vie chrétienne*, p. 162.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.* This inclusion in brackets seeks to better explain the meaning that the tern “contemplative life” has in the original context and to avoid any possible ambiguity.

¹⁶⁵ RV, *La contemplation dans l’Église d’aujourd’hui*, p. 43.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

The fact that contemplation offers an experience recognized as inexpressible does not mean that it is not genuine knowledge. And if it is true that the language of mystics is of a different kind than that of science or reason, it nonetheless expresses a true knowledge of God.

Thus, “the contemplatives who have known how to translate their experience of the divine into human language give us the highest and purest expression of God there can be. You only have to read the greatest among them, Saint John of the Cross for example, to realize this. No, it’s not that the intellect cannot know God but rather that this knowledge is unutterable, which is not the same thing.”¹⁶⁷

According to R. Voillaume, we thus affirm “that in this inner vision, the human intellect arrives at the Truth of God, even though imperfectly. Above and beyond subjective impressions and psychic phenomenon that can accompany contemplation, it is a true encounter with God. [...] Without an objective reality to contemplate, a reality existing in itself outside the subject, contemplation would be no more than a dream or a subjective state, and therefore an alienation.”¹⁶⁸

–Value and limits of human knowledge on the path of prayer

In the search for the encounter with God which is realized through the path of prayer, our natural faculties of knowing, placed at the service of faith, will intervene – each in its own way and according to its own nature.

-a) In our relations with God, we must first emphasize the contribution of the *knowledge that comes to us through our senses*. This knowledge is not always focused on enough.

“Admittedly, contemplation is established beyond the senses, but even in the case of a grace of contemplation that is extremely detached from everything, our human condition remains and we do not have the right to reject the role played by the senses in our life of prayer: for example, the perfume of liturgical incense, the sacred music, and the atmosphere created by forms, colors, and light. All these factors that touch the senses work, without our conscious awareness, on our most spiritual faculties, at least by creating a favorable disposition at the starting point.”¹⁶⁹

“At a time when, more than ever, we address the senses through shapes, colors, sounds, music, images, cinema, television, and advertisements, there would be a real danger to pretend that we can do away with any evocation of the invisible world through the senses, a world to which we must remain present with all our faith. It would be presumptuous to conduct oneself otherwise, adopting an attitude contrary to the laws of human nature and the normal way God wishes to interact with us.”¹⁷⁰

The *imagination* and the *memory* can enrich in a particular way the knowledge of God that comes to us through prayer.

“Ever since the eternal Word of God became flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary in order to live among us, to speak to us in human language, and to perform human actions, our senses have a role to play in the knowledge of God. Jesus has a human face that we must discover and love. It is necessary to have seen him in the diverse situations of his human life, it is necessary to have seen him being born, loving others, healing them and dying for them. It is necessary to have listened to his words and kept all that in our memories. It is the meditation of the Gospel that will thus nourish our memories, imprinting on them the face of Jesus as the one being we

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 56-57.

¹⁶⁸ RV, *De l'importance de la contemplation*, p. 5.

¹⁶⁹ RV, *Lettres aux fraternités III*, p. 14-15.

¹⁷⁰ RV, *Lettres aux fraternités I*, p. 183.

love most. 'As for Mary, she carefully remembered all these things and pondered them in her heart' (Lc 2:19).

But that's not enough, for the Spirit of Jesus also makes his Church and the saints live, act, and speak. The story of the saints, their human appearance, their actions, and their words are a language addressed to our intellect, but sometimes by means of our imagination. There is a sum of teachings there that we must imprint in our memories."¹⁷¹

-b) Just as knowledge through our senses has a role to play in our relationship with God and more concretely on the path of prayer, so too does our *intellect* have its own particular role to play.

"When passing from a prayer of the senses to a more spiritual prayer, we must support this development of our faith by a minimum of theological knowledge. Each person must possess a minimum of knowledge about God, depending on his or her possibilities and circumstances."¹⁷²

"Theological knowledge [...] helps purify the soul of certain imperfect ways of representing the divine reality. It contributes to elevating it above images and conveying it to a more spiritual and thus truer knowledge of the things of God. The movement towards a more spiritual knowledge is essential to matters of faith and the life of prayer."¹⁷³

R. Voillaume explained, however, that "the necessity of theological studies for a fervent life of prayer is, of course, proportionate to the very diverse demands of the various vocations. This study seems indispensable for priests, for religious, and for certain lay vocations in order to give balance to their spiritual life. However, many Christians who are unable to study are able, with the grace of God, to come to an authentic contemplative prayer, provided that, with a docile heart, they have received from the Church whatever teachings they could."¹⁷⁴

-c) R. Voillaume also said that by imprinting within ourselves the images the Gospels use to present Jesus to us, and by reflecting upon his mystery, we become in a sense similar to the apostles and disciples who lived with the Lord. We must realize, however, that for the apostles to have Christ before them in flesh and bone was both the path to knowledge of God and an obstacle, because God, because he is God, is far beyond what we can imagine about him or reflect upon.

Fr. Voillaume recalled that that's why the physical presence of Jesus had to cease. His presence revealed the Father, but it absorbed the imagination of the apostles who were attached to the person of Christ in his visible human aspect. Thus the Cross, the suffering, and the death were necessary and had a painful impact on the apostles, like a scandal, precisely because they did not know how to go beyond a humanly imperfect knowledge and adhesion to the person of Jesus Christ.

Rene Voillaume warned us therefore that "this happens to us, too. We are not hampered by the physical presence of Christ as we don't see Him with our eyes, but we risk being limited by our imaginations and intellectual knowledge, because God is more than and beyond that. That's why in all progression of prayer there will be, in the area of knowledge, a painful, obscure, and sometimes discouraging emergence of another order of knowledge that will remain very obscure. We cannot speak of the knowledge of God in the same way as the knowledge of a

¹⁷¹ RV, *Lettres aux fraternités I*, p. 178.

¹⁷² RV, *Relations interpersonnelles avec Dieu*, p. 80.

¹⁷³ RV, *Au cœur des masses*, p. 363.

¹⁷⁴ RV, *Lettres aux fraternités I*, p. 179 note 1.

human being or truths of the natural order because God wants to lead us farther. And so you understand that entering into a rapport of knowledge with a being who, being God, is spiritual and infinite, is something that is not directly accessible to our human nature. The grace God has given us strengthens our understanding and it will allow us to support this increase in knowledge. But this will come to us as something that God gives us.”¹⁷⁵

–The evolution of knowledge on the path of prayer

Rene Voillaume distinguished three stages in the loving knowledge of God to which prayer introduces us:

a) “There is first of all an order of knowledge in which we are masters of the situation: we meditate on the Gospel and we receive a certain satisfaction in doing so, we read a book of spiritual reading and we have the impression of learning and discovering something. This gives us the joy of understanding and enkindles in our hearts a feeling of love and admiration for God. We have the impression that our personal efforts of meditation and reflection are obtaining results and enriching us. [...] And in these efforts, of course, God is always there helping us, enlightening us, but it seems to us to be the fruit of our own effort. And in general in this period, we go to prayer easily, we note our progress, and we derive from it a joy we can feel. We are in the period of discovery.”¹⁷⁶

We must note that, even though over the years the writings of Fr. Voillaume reflected a growing appreciation of meditation, he always asserted that “at most meditation can be the preparation for prayer and, for some, the door of entry.”¹⁷⁷ But he considers that, strictly speaking, it is not prayer.¹⁷⁸

He reacted “against that conception of prayer which sees it as an exercise of several steps with a series of prepared meditations.”¹⁷⁹ He maintained that “all this can be considered useful before prayer, but it can also hinder the freedom of the soul in the simplicity of its gaze upon God.”¹⁸⁰

However he did recognize that in the beginning we must strive to be faithful to continuous meditation of the Gospels. Hence the following warning:

“Meditation is neither prayer nor contemplation, but it is the basis for them. Someone who at one time or another would never have been able to meditate, due to lack of self-control and attention span, would not be able to possess the natural qualities necessary for the normal development of a simple form of prayer, nor offer a terrain conducive to the action of the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the graces of infused contemplation. Of course there can be exceptions: God can fill souls as he wishes [...] but we must not believe, however, that God can ignore what would be error, neglect, presumption or lack of effort on our part.”¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁵ RV, *Retraite de la Fraternité Séculière (Orsay). V- Le désert. La prière*, p. 5.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ RV, *Au cœur des masses*, p. 120.

¹⁷⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 129.

¹⁷⁹ RV, *Lettre à J-M. Recondo*, 30-7-1984, dans J.M. RECONDO, *La oración en René Voillaume*, Appendice I, Burgos 1989, p. 297.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

Already at the time of his novitiate with the White Fathers (1925-1926), given the graces he received in prayer, he was turned off by the meditations suggested to him, and he disagreed with having to read *Les pratiques de la vie chrétienne* by Father Alonso Rodriguez, S.J., which he continued to study only out of obedience (cf. *Histoire I*, p. 126-127 and p. 205).

¹⁸¹ RV, *Lettres aux fraternités III*, p. 54-55.

On the other hand, he recommended that we not abandon the practice of continuous meditation of the Gospels too rapidly and, in any case, to return to it periodically as Charles de Foucauld himself advised.¹⁸²

Nevertheless, he warned of the risk of taking refuge in a meditated reflection that serves as an alibi, consciously or unconsciously, for not going to the very end of the absolute abandonment of ourselves – death to all that is not God – which we must accomplish as a prerequisite for prayer.¹⁸³

And finally, he observed that this first stage must serve to “strengthen our faith and exercise our wills in the work of love, so that one day we are able to be in a simpler state of being, a state of interior poverty, which is neither too soon nor too late for the influence of God. It is the wealth of possessing God that alone can make us poor: otherwise we risk losing our lives without being able to get them back.”¹⁸⁴ He warned about the sort of danger of exposing oneself, either presumptuously or carelessly, to the premature abandonment of meditation – when it is not simply a case of underestimating its value due to lack of experience.

b) Fr. Voillaume affirmed that little by little God can introduce us into another stage which is a period of impoverishment and purification. At this stage, the cross makes its appearance in our knowledge of the Lord. We experience a certain boredom, the impression that we no longer find in prayer what filled us and satisfied us; and we find nothing new anymore.

“It is a purification because it turns the attention away from ourselves; for we must not forget that God wants to actually draw us to Himself and does not just want us to feel a certain satisfaction in thinking of Him. [...] At that moment, God draws us beyond our natural and possible understanding into a simple intellectual void: we can no longer think. It is this painful aspect which sometimes results in a kind of boredom. And, from the fact that we have reached a limit in our understanding, we are worn out. We have reflected so much on the Gospels that we feel we have exhausted them. Of course, I am always speaking here of developing our knowledge of Jesus in our very acts of loving him. Don’t forget that, otherwise what I say makes no sense. In this void, it is your love that will go painfully in search of the Lord. Without that you would no longer go searching for him.”¹⁸⁵

This work of purification that God accomplishes in us imperceptibly produces a growth, a going beyond ourselves.

“It is then that another form of knowing begins to emerge in our heart [...] but a knowing which escapes us and is the fruit of its painful character and of the darkness we have suffered in reflection and prayer. It is a certain feeling that develops, that is hard to explain, that is hard to speak about, and it simply means that we know that we know God more than we can say.”¹⁸⁶

¹⁸² RV, *Lettres aux fraternités II*, p. 272-273.

The letters of Fr. Voillaume that we refer to were written, one volume at the end of 1959 (*Lettres aux Fraternités II*, p. 272-273) and the other volume at the beginning of 1961 (*Lettre aux Fraternités III*, p. 51-58). They show the author’s re-evaluation of meditation, in connection with the formation the Little Brothers were to receive on the path of prayer, and which had already shown up, in a sense, in 1958 when he wrote *Le Chemin de la prière* (dans *Lettres aux Fraternité I*, p. 161-226). He also gave recognition to this in *Lettres aux Fraternités II*, p. 236-237.

¹⁸³ Cf. RV, *Au cœur des masses*, p. 120 et 239 ; *Lettres aux fraternités I*, p. 207-208.

¹⁸⁴ RV, *Lettres aux fraternités II*, p. 237-238.

¹⁸⁵ RV, *Retraite de la Fraternité Séculière (Orsay). V- Le désert. La prière*, p. 6.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

According to Rene Voillaume, this experience cannot be put into words due to the fact that it takes place beyond our imagination and intellect.

“While praying you don’t want to think of anything; yet all the same, the feeling that it is more than if you took a book to read or meditate on or if you were thinking about the mystery of the Trinity with clear ideas. You have no desire to do so, not out of intellectual laziness but because you are in front of God in a higher way, but which you cannot express. That happens often enough. [...] It can be periodic or it can become established as a state after a certain time.”¹⁸⁷

This type of situation can also produce a certain perplexity in some persons:

“Some of us who are faithful to prayer go through periods of scrupulosity. We say to ourselves, ‘I don’t know how to pray, I have abandoned reading. I used to read the Gospel and would get something out of it; now I have no more desire to do so. Is this laziness? Am I really no longer generous in my prayer?’ It is then that we must know how to say to ourselves, ‘Am I doing what I can? Or do I lack generosity?’ You say to yourselves, ‘No, actually I go to prayer with a lot of courage but when I pick up the Gospel, it doesn’t speak to me at all.’ Then it is enough to know that there is a certain way of knowing God that does not come from our initiative but from the Lord’s. It is the gifts of the Holy Spirit working in you. It is a certain knowing that escapes your governing it.”¹⁸⁸

c) Rene Voillaume pointed out that there is an intermediate period characterized by the prayer of simplicity and which normally prepares the way for the grace of contemplation.

“When you are used to thinking a lot about someone, you are not going to look at his or her face in detail. No, you have a kind of very simple global way of thinking, a kind of inner way of seeing that renders you present and that comes from the habit of thinking of this person. It’s quite natural. With God, something similar happens. For a person who prays regularly enough and often, there is a kind of habit of placing oneself in the presence of God which simplifies things and which is like a summary or general reminder of all the memories we have of Christ. There is no longer the need for details, to think of the Lord as a child or on the cross. No, I think of all of this all at once, in one single glance. It is the fruit of the habit of prayer. We call it the prayer of gazing. We gaze but without thinking of anything precise. And it is generally at that moment that the transition is made to that painful prayer because we don’t know any more how it’s done.”¹⁸⁹

To conclude, let us emphasize once again that what we have just seen about knowledge in prayer cannot be understood without the presence of love. Contemplatives know by experience to what extent this “infinitely luminous, though mysteriously obscure” knowledge that prayer offers “is the fruit of a great love, takes place within that love, and that such knowledge is in turn the source of an increase of love.”¹⁹⁰

Prayer and Love

For human persons, the possibility of an intimate encounter with God ultimately depends on the existence of a *mutual search* that originates in love. This intimate encounter must be such

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 6-7.

¹⁹⁰ RV, *La contemplation dans l’Église d’aujourd’hui*, p. 45.

that true dialogue takes place and the encounter grows in depth as its mystery becomes more and more familiar.

–Loved by God

That presupposes above all believing that God loves us, that he is interested in each of us, and that he is searching for us. Because, in the last resort, “the truth, the conviction on which we must firmly establish our life of love, is the certainty of being loved by Christ, not with just any kind of love, but with a preferential love that is unique and marked by friendship: this certainty of faith is a necessary prerequisite for all our efforts to love God. As long as we have not discovered this, we cannot advance either in love or in the life of prayer. This is because our love for God must and *can only be a response*. How can we be able to really love if we are not first loved?”¹⁹¹

“For us it is not so much a question of being convinced in faith that God sent his Son to save the world – because we believe that in a general way, we believe that the Lord loves the world and all humankind – but rather it is a question of believing enough that we, personally, are loved.”¹⁹²

Fr. Voillaume added that the lives of saints “teach us precisely that for them all began with the discovery and certainty of being loved by God.”¹⁹³

It is not therefore a question of “those feelings which are felt at certain glorious hours of our spiritual life when the Lord allows us to taste inner joys that help us discover his love for us. It is a feeling that is deeper than that, something stronger, capable of resisting all temptations and scandals: the certainty of knowing we are loved!”¹⁹⁴

To maintain this certainty at the basis of our spiritual life, we thus need “the spirit of faith in abundance! It must be an unshakeable conviction and not just a passing feeling.”¹⁹⁵

R. Voillaume recognized, however, that for the great majority of people to really believe that God is personally interested in them is not easy: “There is much weakness and weariness on the spiritual path and in the hearts of Christians due to their no longer knowing that they are loved.”¹⁹⁶ The presence of evil, suffering and death on the one side, and on the other side, the difficulty of accepting ourselves before God as we are– even when we feel guilty or weak – makes it difficult to perceive the mystery of the love hidden in God.”¹⁹⁷

Besides, as we tend to represent God in an anthropomorphic manner, “just thinking that there are currently hundreds of millions of people on earth plunges us into a feeling of loneliness and anonymity, and we wonder how God could be interested in each and every one of us! We cannot imagine him capable of sharing his attention among multitudes of beings. We say to ourselves, ‘I can be of no interest to him!’ And thus we reach the point of doubting that we are loved.”¹⁹⁸

¹⁹¹ RV, *Relations interpersonnelles avec Dieu*, p. 48-49.

¹⁹² RV, *Retraite au Vatican*, p. 42.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ RV, *Relations interpersonnelles avec Dieu*, p. 49.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹⁹⁶ RV, *Retraite au Vatican*, p. 42.

¹⁹⁷ cf. RV, *Lettres aux Fraternités I*, p. 322-323 ; *Relations interpersonnelles avec Dieu*, p. 48-51 ; *L'éducation de l'amour*, « Jésus-Caritas » n° 134 – 1964, p. 22-27.

¹⁹⁸ RV, *Où est votre foi ?*, p. 134.

R. Voillaume recalled however that, on the contrary, the saints, thanks to a deep intuition of divine simplicity, were persuaded that “when we withdraw into solitude, God with all his love is entirely ours.”¹⁹⁹

“When we read the dialogues of Catherine of Siena with her Lord, we get the impression that the Lord has no one else on earth to take care of but her.”²⁰⁰ “Is it not a disproportionate ambition or a foolish imagining to feel what St Theresa of the Infant Jesus felt when she believed that Christ her God was entirely occupied with her? No, quite to the contrary, it is a very profound intuition about the mystery of the simplicity of God who always gives himself totally.”²⁰¹ “God is so simple that that he cannot be divided, so much so that wherever he is he is there wholly and entirely. Wherever the love of God is, all the love of God is there. We cannot be ‘half-loved’, or loved ‘a little bit’ by God; we cannot enjoy just a little piece of God’s love. That’s not possible. God’s love is simple.”²⁰²

Fr. Voillaume assured us then that, if we want to move forward towards intimacy with the Lord, “we have to begin by believing that! We must ask for this grace of ‘knowing we are loved.’”²⁰³

–“**You will love the Lord your God**” (Mt. 22:37)

Noting that we need to *learn to love God*, R. Voillaume declared that he was convinced that, in our relationship with the Lord, we must attain a whole maturing of the heart so that our love can develop. More concretely, on the path of prayer there is a divine pedagogy through which, between consolations and desolations, we are gradually *educated* in loving him. We are now going to take a look at the description that Fr. Voillaume gave of this process.

a) He said that frequently, in the beginnings of our life of prayer, we experience a certain fullness, the fruit of affective graces received at that time. Because of these *consolations* we go to pray full of enthusiasm and with joy. It’s normal that this should happen and it is even desirable that we pass through this stage for a more or less long time, because “this joy and this spontaneity of prayer comes from the Lord. They are intended to bring us out of ourselves in order to initiate us in loving him, the Virgin Mary, and the Saints.”²⁰⁴

b) However, we must accept that these feelings may weaken and even disappear because feelings “are fickle and only useful to the beginner for initially stimulating our wills and because true love resides in the will. We must firmly believe that true prayer, the path of union with God, is beyond our feelings.”²⁰⁵

“It is not necessary that you *feel* it. Tell yourselves firmly that our prayer is never more real, nor more profound, than when it unfolds outside the realm of our senses. Persons who truly pray lose sight of themselves. They look only at God and it is with a look of pure faith, hope, and love that none of the senses, and often nothing *felt*, will console. We must establish ourselves in this conviction in order to consider the unfolding of our prayer life with confidence.”²⁰⁶

¹⁹⁹ RV, *Retraite au Vatican*, p. 43.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁰¹ RV, *Relations interpersonnelles avec Dieu*, p. 52.

²⁰² RV, *Retraite au Vatican*, p. 42-43.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁴ RV, *Lettres aux fraternités I*, p. 168.

²⁰⁵ RV, *Au cœur des masses*, p. 121.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

When our feelings disappear, it seems to us that we are “doing poorly when actually our life is finally going as God wants it to.”²⁰⁷ It is through this purification that we are introduced to greater gratuitousness and true maturity in loving God.

“Of course, during the months or perhaps even the years of consolation, during which you returned from prayer as if dilated by a spiritual euphoria or a sense of enlightenment about the truths of faith or the Gospel, you may not have questioned whether it was above all for your own satisfaction. Because you saw tangible results, you would go joyfully to adoration. So, when all of a sudden a prayer of faith with its dryness of the senses and emptiness of intellect sets in, there will be turmoil. A change of surroundings, of atmosphere, of the hardness and fatigue of work would have sufficed for that. Or it would have been enough that Jesus simply ceased attracting you by incentives other than He Himself. Then comes discouragement, weariness with prayer, and you no longer believe enough in its importance to remain faithful to it. You will no longer be available for prayer.

You have to absolutely convince yourself to go to adoration, not for receiving but for giving, and, furthermore, often giving without even realizing that you are giving and without seeing what you give. You go there in the cloud of unknowing to simply give your whole being to God.”²⁰⁸

We must, therefore, accept this transformation that prayer must undergo, and not just theoretically. To do so, we must consent to detach ourselves from our feelings and learn to journey in the darkness of faith.

“We can teach about it, know it intellectually, but when it is we ourselves who are plunged into this interior dryness and this darkness, we become discouraged, thrown off our horse. We don’t know any longer where we are, and we are really close to abandoning prayer. We abandon prayer because we no longer feel it is useful. It is no longer satisfying. That’s because, generally speaking, we are satisfied with our prayer because we ‘feel’ it. To some extent we are the witnesses of our own prayer. We look at it, are satisfied with it, and we say that it was good. Now just this sole satisfaction with our own prayer is a sign of its imperfection, because it is the sign that it is prayer that we are seeking more than God himself.”²⁰⁹

Fr. Voillaume recalled, on the other hand, that the Saints have often had to persevere in loving God in the midst of the obscurity of faith, an obscurity which in many cases, over time, even ended by being more total and painful. In this sense he referred to what Brother Charles wrote at the end of his life when he confessed having to “cling to his faith” because he no longer knew if he loved God or if God loved him.

“And yet, when we are in such a state of darkness, we know that we belong to the Lord, we know that despite our misery, despite the darkness, we are anyway responding to his love and to our being profoundly loved by him.”²¹⁰

c) Moreover, Rene Voillaume always insisted on the importance of *persevering*, recalling that “even if no light is still filtering its way under the door, our task of love consists in knocking, in living our daily rhythm of prayer in faith.”²¹¹

“It’s a manifestation of the love of God for us that we are allowed to persevere in hope in front of a closed door, knocking ceaselessly because we trusted in the word of the One we seek

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 238-239.

²⁰⁹ RV, *Relations interpersonnelles avec Dieu*, p. 79.

²¹⁰ RV, *Retraite au Vatican*, p. 48.

²¹¹ RV, *Lettres aux fraternités I*, p. 287.

everyday along a deserted road. ‘Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; and the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks it will be opened’ (Mt. 7:7-8). Our search in itself is already an encounter, and our being stationed before the door has already introduced us inside of the mystery without our even knowing it. Let us accept with joy the part the Lord has reserved for us. Whatever it may be, we are assured that this lot will contain for each of us our share of divine life, hope, light, and especially participation in the cross.”²¹²

–Love for God and dispossession of self

In addition to the work of purification which, as we have seen, the Spirit of God is in the process of accomplishing in our hearts, we must undertake a work of dispossession of ourselves, as a condition for a loving union with God.

a) According to R. Voillaume, this implies first of all attaining “at the very moment of prayer [...] and in a very real way, a kind of death to all that is not God.”²¹³

“It is not enough to really and truly leave humankind behind us by entering a silent church or by willingly stopping to work. We must leave in spirit the whole of creation, in such a way that nothing but nothing stands between us and God, which implies being detached from ourselves and from everything for God. That also means that at the moment of prayer, we must be able to consciously prefer God to everything else.”²¹⁴

b) “This willingness to welcome God, even for such a short time, cannot be improvised, for it is dependent on the rest of our lives. If we want to be honest with ourselves, we must do everything we possibly can in the way of self-detachment in order to be able, throughout our daily occupations, to prefer Jesus to everything and to love him more than anything.”²¹⁵ That involves first of all accepting that “especially in our youth, we need to learn to discipline ourselves, to take ourselves in hand, and to practice doing what we have decided to do, which implies that we know how to not always do what pleases us but sometimes what displeases us.”²¹⁶

It is important however not to lose sight of the fact that “the absolute necessity of asceticism and self-discipline” is only “for leaving the field open to the action of the Holy Spirit” or, to express it in other terms, “for transforming ourselves into docile instruments of God’s love.”²¹⁷

c) What we do not always weigh enough – or assume enough – is the degree of self-detachment that God is calling for. Thus, “neglecting to establish ourselves in a state of dispossession of ourselves and total availability, which are the fruits of true humility and courageous mortification, is too often the cause, whatever generosity might be involved, of numerous souls soon reaching a certain ceiling in the practice of love [...]. In one word, it’s

²¹² *Ibid.*

²¹³ RV, *Au cœur des masses*, p. 239.

²¹⁴ RV, *Lettres aux fraternités I*, p. 186.

²¹⁵ RV, *Entretiens sur la vie religieuse*, p. 145.

²¹⁶ RV, *Histoire I*, p. 257. He pointed out, however, “that a life is not better simply because it is ‘regulated’. Many illusions are rooted in fidelity to a rule, in the measure that it shifts the center of gravity away from love. Love is a center of gravity that is always outside of ourselves and in God or others and is therefore unpredictable in its requirements and escaping any rule or prediction.” (*Ibid.*)

²¹⁷ RV, *Au cœur des masses*, p. 279.

building on sand and no longer participating fully in the life of Christ, in which is found a mystery of death to which we are associated through baptism. Life comes out of death: “If the grain of wheat does not fall into the ground and die it remains but a single grain and gives no fruit.”²¹⁸

Several years later Rene Voillaume added that:

“In the beginning of the journey that leads to God, we can have many illusions if we think that a certain degree of renouncement may be sufficient and that the gift of ourselves to others can take its place. No, even in giving ourselves to others there can be an illusion, even though this gift can be a sure path for arriving at perfect self-renouncement.

[...] In the beginnings of our growth in the divine life, everything will seem to go well. Generosity, a certain gift of ourselves to others, real sacrifices, and a life of sincere piety can deceive us for awhile. But with time, when the age of a more austere faith will require a gift to God without any compensation of feelings of any kind, the ascent will cease as if a certain ceiling can no longer be exceeded for lack of sufficient momentum. The building risks remaining unfinished, because the builder would not have been able to give consent to the final detachments. That’s why so many priests and religious experience a time of halt in their ascent before falling into mediocrity. Who is not tempted one day or another to take up a restful position incompatible with the tireless demands of a love coming from the Infinite?”²¹⁹

Learning to pray

Without denying the absolute freedom of the Spirit of God who can work in our hearts without regard to our dispositions, R. Voillaume observed that it is also certain that prayer usually “needs to be learned.”

“We must not think that it suffices to leave young people alone in front of the Lord doing whatever they want or what they can, dreaming or not dreaming, sleeping or not sleeping, making mental kinds of efforts, or being content to try to feel a vague sense of affection for the presence of God, and then let them fall into discouragement when they can’t manage it! It is still necessary to shed some light on such efforts, often generous, but not well oriented.”²²⁰

The habit of “prolonged prayer, seeking natural and supernatural contemplation, gift of the Spirit of Jesus, is not acquired in a day. A long initiation is necessary, taking for granted both spiritual direction and persevering fidelity.”²²¹

–Prayer as seeking and receiving

Fr. Voillaume maintained that on the path of prayer there is, on the one hand “an apprenticeship of seeking God which involves activities within human reach.” But that, because the Lord comes to meet us, “there is another apprenticeship to be made which consists in disposing ourselves to receive the gift of God in the silence of our ability to act.”²²² In all prayer, therefore, there coexists an active *seeking* and a passive *receiving* of the gift of God which, in one way or another, will always have to be present.

But we realize that we have not always maintained the necessary harmony between these two elements. In fact, the overrating or the underrating of the significance of *methods* in praying

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

²¹⁹ RV, *Lettres aux fraternités II*, p. 120 et 122.

²²⁰ RV, *Des rapports entre la vie active et la vie contemplative ou entre prière et action*, p. 769.

²²¹ RV, *Histoire 9*, p. 299.

²²² RV, *Entretiens sur la vie religieuse*, p. 152.

have often led to these imbalances. Fr. Voillaume addressed this issue on several occasions, pointing out the inadequate positions and then giving each dimension its rightful place.

–The value of methods

First of all, he said that we have to avoid thinking that in order to pray “it is enough to simply present ourselves before God just as we are without some preparation of body and soul.”²²³ In this sense, *contempt for any method* of disposing ourselves for prayer presupposes that we are ignorant of the collaboration which we must provide to God’s initiatives and the work of grace.

“There is a tendency to be wary of any discipline, of any external help, under the pretext of being true and remaining ourselves. This susceptibility to safeguarding our spontaneity, and founding the essential value of our prayer on this, prevents us from fully understanding what true freedom is. This horror of what is artificial, of external forms, of routine, makes us instinctively reject all traditional prayer supports, any method, and any means of disciplining the imagination or the spirit. [...] We thirst for realism, and by dint of wanting to avoid the risk of getting stuck on the way, we no longer want to take any path and we are liable to wander into a premature void where we find ourselves unable to progress. This void is not the total desert where there is no more path at all. That total void comes only after having followed a path that is long, narrow and steep.”²²⁴

Methods have no other purpose than “helping our attention, both spiritual and that of our senses, to be directed towards the things of God with the eyes of faith.”²²⁵ This “will vary greatly from one person to another, depending on our temperament, physical state, occupation, and how more or less used we are to recollection in prayer. But it depends especially on the way we welcome the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.”²²⁶

We must also take into account the fact that what was more precise and structured at the beginning will become more and more simplified with the years until it is transformed into “a mere inner habit of attention to the divine presence.”²²⁷

In any case, “it would be negligent on our part to dispense with providing ourselves with a method of prayer adapted to our spiritual condition, even if we have to modify it later.”²²⁸

–The relativity of methods

On the other hand, Fr. Voillaume recalled that a “method has no value in itself but in the help it gives us. It is only a tool, a means, which must be abandoned as soon as possible, in the sense that when we enter into dialogue with God there is no more question of a method!”²²⁹

He also observed that the simpler the path that leads to prayer, the better it is, “because it interferes less between God’s action and us. The simplicity of means helps us not look at ourselves.”²³⁰

Fr. Voillaume was convinced that “we can and must learn to recollect ourselves and create a silent space within,” and he acknowledged that “the disciplines of Buddhism or yoga, which

²²³ RV, *Relations interpersonnelles avec Dieu*, p. 81.

²²⁴ RV, *Lettres aux fraternités I*, p. 173-174.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*

²²⁹ RV, *Relations interpersonnelles avec Dieu*, p. 82.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*

are also disciplines of the mind and senses, can take the place of this preparation for the recollection of spirit that the ‘methods of prayer’ used to provide.”²³¹

However, he pointed out that in order for this to be so, it is necessary that these exercises be “reoriented and undertaken in their proper place, as means of preparation, and in the Christian perspective of contemplation. Otherwise they will just be activities, beneficial certainly in terms of human equilibrium, but on the path of Christian prayer, they will quickly lead to a dead end.”²³²

The fundamental difference between the two perspectives lies in the fact that the main attraction of these Eastern methods is that “they produce results which we can see and which, up to a certain point, we can be sure of obtaining if we persevere in the path indicated. The spiritual results are acquired by our efforts, whereas Christian prayer can only flourish gratuitously and beyond any acquired internal state.”²³³

To which he added that “the Christian way of contemplation passes through the cross and through the union of love with Christ. It demands an ultimate renunciation of oneself and of all activity of the mind, in such a way that the soul becomes totally available to receiving a gift of light and love which it would be absolutely incapable of procuring by its own efforts.”²³⁴

Finally, it seems permissible to apply to the question we are in the process of analyzing what Rene Voillaume said in the following text about devotional exercises.²³⁵ We can thus compare the role of methods in prayer to “a scaffolding or temporary formwork used to construct a building as long as there is not enough cement. Several circumstances can of course arise: if we remove the scaffolding while construction is still going on, the work is interrupted and remains incomplete. If the latter seems finished and we remove some of the formwork or certain parts of the scaffolding too early, there is a risk of a general or partial collapse of the building. On the contrary, once the structural work has been completed, it is often necessary to dismantle certain lower sections of the scaffolding in order to continue the construction more easily without the scaffolding being in the way. Once the building is solid and completely finished, it cannot take on its full value and the finishing touches be made unless all the scaffolding has been removed.”²³⁶

–The preparation for prayer

In reality and strictly speaking, it is not prayer as such that we can *learn*. It’s a question rather of the knowledge of a series of predispositions and the adoption of a set of attitudes that dispose us interiorly for the encounter with the Lord. Fr. Voillaume addressed this issue on various occasions, but it was especially in his letter *The Way of Prayer* that he examined more attentively the way in which we must prepare ourselves for prayer (cf. *Lettres aux Fraternités I*, p.161-226).

²³¹ RV, *Lettres aux fraternités IV*, p. 95.

²³² *Ibid.*

²³³ *Ibid.*

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

²³⁵ R. Voillaumdoes so himself in *Relations interpersonnelles avec Dieu*, p. 82.

²³⁶ RV, *Au cœur des masses*, p. 262.

a) In the first place, the moment of prayer is prepared by the way in which we performed the other activities of the day because “prayer is connected *with our life*, and it can [usually] be no better than we ourselves are.”²³⁷

Prayer “is an act of our very being as a Christian. The same habits and the same virtues are at play in the solitude of prayer as in our everyday life in the midst of humankind. It’s only the objective and the direction of the action that are quite different.”²³⁸

“We are united to Jesus to the extent that we truly love him. This intimate bond that connects us to him is the same whether our spirit is totally engaged in the act of prayer or given over to no matter what activity involving work or relationships.”²³⁹

In spite of everything, in speaking to the Little Brothers and Little Sisters of Jesus, R. Voillaume brought up an important clarification of the subject:

“For you, brothers and sisters, the ultimate preparation for prayer consists in the generous authenticity of your religious life. In everything, have a genuine and pure love, stripped of illusions. But as you will never be conscious of achieving such perfection, you must in any case enter into the state of mind of the publican, recognizing your sinfulness in all truth, peace, and humility.”²⁴⁰

b) On the other hand, everything that nourishes *our faith* and gets it to act prepares us for prayer. Fr. Voillaume insisted on this subject because he considered that “our mistake is often wanting to exercise charity without worrying enough about nourishing our faith [...]. This is perhaps our greatest deficiency and it is up to us to remedy it in order to learn to pray better.”²⁴¹

“Prayer is not improvised. It’s too linked to our very selves. [...] Our faith will awaken at the moment of prayer depending on the degree of strength and life it has reached in its growth. To leave our faith the freedom to express itself in a heart to heart meeting with God, *our faith knowledge must have been sufficiently nourished outside of prayer*. Without nourishment, our faith can wither until it can no longer bear fruit. Faith is a living reality. It is nourished by the knowledge that God proposes to it and it is strengthened by acts it arouses in charity.”²⁴²

“It is not enough to nourish our faith, *we have to put it into action*. [...] If our faith has not been exercised during the day, we should not be surprised to find that a sort of stiffness has set in at the time of adoration!”²⁴³

c) Going on to note the *immediate preparation* for disposing ourselves to pray, Rene Voillaume warned that “at the moment of prayer, all our capacities to know and to act must be turned directly towards Jesus and exclusively absorbed in him.”²⁴⁴

The authenticity of our prayer will depend on how we have managed to carry out this turning towards God. [...] This transition is indispensable, and if we have not done it seriously, our

²³⁷ RV, *Lettres aux fraternités I*, p. 185. The highlighting is ours. If we add the word “usually” in brackets, it’s because we believe that the freedom of Spirit can occasionally give rise to prayer experiences that do not correspond and are not proportional to the general situation of a Christian before God – especially in its moral dimension.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

²⁴⁰ RV, *Entretiens sur la vie religieuse*, p. 146.

²⁴¹ RV, *Lettres aux fraternités I*, p. 172-173.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 175-176.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

prayer will not be good. The most important moment of our prayer is the beginning. Does not St Thomas go so far as to say that it is only in our power to begin our prayer well, for it is very difficult, if not impossible for us, even with the help of grace, to persevere for very long and prolong it without being disturbed by distractions. But it is always within our power to begin our prayer well.”²⁴⁵

Fr. Voillaume affirmed, therefore, that we can and must learn to recollect ourselves, to create a certain silence within ourselves, and that “in all this we must not forget the participation of our body.”²⁴⁶

“The way we hold ourselves in prayer must both express our adoration of God and make inner recollection easier. [...] We cannot say that we have done our best to pray well if we have not made an effort with regard to our physical posture. [...] A respectful attitude towards the body is like a pledge to God that we will be inwardly attentive to his presence.”²⁴⁷

In any case, since, according to R. Voillaume, “we really only have power over the beginning of prayer,”²⁴⁸ we must make ourselves start all over again from time to time if necessary, *recuperating* in this way the disposition requisite for prayer.

“Do not forget that faith implies attention and that attention, as a rule, doesn’t manage to focus for long on the same object unless supported by strong impressions coming from outside ourselves. To fix our inner attention for more than a few minutes on an invisible subject is something difficult to do. We must therefore foresee resuming our prayer frequently, for example every ten or fifteen minutes. Don’t be afraid to kneel down again and renew your perception of the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist or to read a few lines of the Gospel.”²⁴⁹

As for *distractions* that can come, he reminded us that even though there is no method in existence that can allow us to totally avoid them during prayer, we must nevertheless adopt all the means deemed useful for keeping our imaginative and intellectual attention fixed on God. Then, when we have done everything possible, “the essential is to strive to remain peaceful.”²⁵⁰

“We don’t always have to be struggling non-stop against distractions or daydreams, which would be draining and also ineffective, but we should simply strive to bring the imagination and intellect back to God, to Jesus, without letting it upset us.

We must also address the causes. In fact, distractions depend on causes which most often exist prior to prayer: worries, preoccupations due to work matters, concerns, our memories bringing up the whole of our daily life, and all the more easily because, at the moment of prayer, the realm of consciousness is precisely free from all other activity.

[...] The best remedy for distractions consists in being faithful to the preparation for prayer by trying to detach ourselves from the occupations we have just left behind, by returning to a state of inner and outer calm, and by a clear as possible transition from the agitation of multiple activities to the immobility of prayer. We must purify our memories, learning to postpone until later both the examination of our worries and the seeking of solutions for questions that are worrying us.”²⁵¹

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 190 et 192.

²⁴⁶ RV, *Lettres aux fraternités IV*, p. 95.

²⁴⁷ RV, *Lettres aux fraternités I*, p. 194-195.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.* p. 195.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 202-204.

We must also take account of the fact that, often in prayer, the attentiveness of mind and heart while awaiting the gift of God “is above and beyond the distractions of the imagination and the memory. It is situated at a different level.”²⁵²

“During the most violent of storms, waves affect only the surface of the sea, while the submarine finds itself in perpetual calm at a certain depth. And atmospheric disturbances affect only the lowest layers of the atmosphere. Likewise, after having done what is possible and normal to do in order to concentrate, fending off wandering thoughts and imaginative memories, we must learn to find the peace and silence of God above and beyond the movements of the universe of our senses, without worrying about submitting the latter to a silence for which it is not made. We would be losing our time! Nothing can manifest better how we already belong to two universes here below. This habit of joining the peace of God beyond the movements and activities of the senses and feelings, disposes us to finding and keeping a certain oneness with him all throughout our work activities and relationships. It is at this level that we will encounter in God the source of that peace promised by Jesus. It will entirely invade us and dispose us to welcome and love others better.”²⁵³

d) Once we have done all that we know and can do to prepare ourselves properly for prayer, the only thing that remains is to “persevere with confidence and with respect for the prayer without growing tired of preparing and beginning it well each day, putting our heart into it each time as if it were the first day, with the same expectation of Jesus’ visit, and remaining in peace, certain that in the darkness and whatever we are feeling, Jesus is present, happy with us, and that our prayer is effective.”²⁵⁴

Fr. Voillaume insisted on the fact that we don’t have to worry about the results obtained which, in any case, escape our appreciation:

“God alone knows the value of our prayer. It is better not to reflect on our prayer itself, but rather on the way we have faithfully prepared ourselves for it, disposed our heart, and actively and appropriately collaborated with it. If we have done our best, then we have only to persevere without ever becoming discouraged.”²⁵⁵

Jesus, the Path of prayer

–Jesus, the Path

When Rene Voillaume questioned the possibility of engaging in and maintaining intimacy with God, he reminded us that it is only in *Jesus Christ* that we can cross the infinite distance that separates us from Him (cf. Jn.14:6).

“It is good to remind ourselves that ‘God dwells in an inaccessible light’ (1 Tim. 6:16) and that there is no common measure between ‘God’s world’ and ‘the created world’ of the cosmos and humanity. The history of Israel shows us to what point the warning the Lord gave Moses on Sinai that ‘humankind cannot see me and remain alive’ (Ex. 33:20) had penetrated the religious consciousness of the people of the Old Covenant. God is, in himself, inaccessible to human knowledge. Even what can be known, first of all his existence, which can be recognized through the testimony of his works, is not something evident to the human intellect. [...] Left to their own forces, human beings can only see and directly reach visible and material creation.

²⁵² RV, *Entretiens sur la vie religieuse*, p. 147-148.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 216-217.

²⁵⁴ RV, *Lettres aux fraternités I*, p. 199.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 208

That is the only possible starting point for his natural knowledge. Of course, I am not speaking here of what a person can glimpse in his heart when touched by grace.”²⁵⁶

In spite of his infinite transcendence, we have access through Jesus Christ to knowing his mystery and to a relationship of communion and personal intimacy with God (cf. Col. 1:15, Eph. 2:18; 3:12).

“We are not, however, irremediably cut off from ‘God’s world’ because there exists, in fact, a third ‘world’, that of Jesus Christ, which touches the two others: the inaccessible one of God and that of creatures.”²⁵⁷

Jesus Christ “is the Way, the Way of Prayer, the Way to the Father, the only bridge established over the abyss that separates the unfathomable mystery of God from human seeking.”²⁵⁸

“Since the transcendent, intangible, invisible world of God totally escapes our human experience, we feel somewhat lost before it. But when it is a question of Jesus, who was seen and heard here on earth, who has a body and is a man forever and eternally, what excuse can we invent for not striving to get to know him and reach him?”²⁵⁹

On the other hand, we know that Jesus no longer has the direct contact with us that he had with his apostles who could see and touch him. Even so, R. Voillaume reminded us that we must believe in his presence, certain moreover that, risen, he continues to be accessible to us. Furthermore, he “sees us, [...] knows us, [...] and is present to our most intimate thoughts at every moment of our lives.”²⁶⁰

“We know that Jesus is alive, and because of our faith in the Risen Jesus we believe that he is close to each of us. If there is in him all the immensity of the Creator and eternal God, all the transcendence of God three times holy, there is also all the extremes of human tenderness and intimacy found in the purest of friendships. We firmly believe in the coexistence in the heart of Christ of these two realities - I was going to say of these two infinities: the infinity of the proximity of love and constant intimacy and the infinity of God the Creator, the end of all things, the sovereign Truth and One who is. We have to rediscover this mystery every day of our lives.”²⁶¹

We must also recall that in the preface to *Raïssa’s Journal*, which Jacques Maritain published after his wife’s death, Fr. Voillaume, quoting a text from it, alluded to the essential link between Christian contemplation and the humanity of Jesus Christ:

“I can’t resist citing another text [...] in which Raïssa expresses a truth regarding Christian contemplation which I consider essential: ‘Some spiritual thinkers believe that the highest contemplation, being delivered from all the images of the world, is that which dispenses with images entirely, even that of Jesus, and consequently does not cross the threshold of the humanity of Jesus. This is a profound error, and the problem disappears as soon as we understand with what truth and depth the Word assumed human nature in such a way that everything belonging to human nature - suffering, pity, compassion, hope - all these things became, so to speak, attributes of God. In contemplating these attributes of God, it is God himself who is contemplated.’”²⁶²

²⁵⁶ RV, *Relations interpersonnelles avec Dieu*, p. 41.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁸ RV, *Entretiens sur la vie religieuse*, p. 141.

²⁵⁹ RV, *Relations interpersonnelles avec Dieu*, p. 42.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

²⁶¹ RV, *Retraite au Vatican*, p. 20.

²⁶² RV, *Préface au Journal de Raïssa*, dans J. et R. MARITAIN, *Œuvres Complètes XV*, p. 152.

Speaking to the Little Brothers about the way they were to pray, he said:

“Our inner gaze will preferably be on Jesus and *based in the Eucharistic presence and meditation of the Gospel*.”²⁶³

Beyond the immediate recipients of this statement, our author expresses here, in very few words, the place, in his opinion, that the Word of God and the Eucharistic mystery have in Christian prayer.

–To Jesus through the Scriptures

Rene Voillaume maintained that meditation on the Holy Scriptures is the most appropriate means for preparing ourselves for prayer.²⁶⁴ He also observed that the present generations are calling for methods that are more plain and sober, the traditional ones often being ineffective, whereas simpler methods are better received. And “the simplest consists in going straight to the essentials, simply taking the meditation of the Lord’s word in the Gospels as a method of prayer.”²⁶⁵

“It is in the meditation of Jesus’ acts and words, in the contemplation of his Heart, striving to understand him more and more deeply, that we will be able to journey towards the knowledge of God.”²⁶⁶

“Christian prayer is a germination of the Word of God. It is, in a way, the fruitfulness of the Word of God in our faith-enlightened intellects and in our hearts, helping us penetrate further into the mystery of God, in the obscure light of a growing love.”²⁶⁷

–To Jesus in the Eucharist

Before considering the place that Fr. Voillaume gave to the Eucharist on the path of mental or personal prayer, we must allude to the relation which, in his opinion, exists between the latter and *liturgical prayer* in general. First of all he pointed out the necessity of not seeing them as opposites and of correctly understanding their mutual influence on each other.

“We must never think of them as opposed to one another. Both are part of the Christian calling, both are essential to the Church. Far from seeing them as opposites, we must bring them into harmony with one another. If the Christians who participate in liturgy lose their personal and intimate connection with Christ, liturgy will remain a formal act. Liturgy would likewise lose its very purpose if it does not ultimately lead souls to the eternal contemplation of God. [...] Liturgy must be the source of prayer and personal contemplation— and for those with an inner spiritual life, it certainly is.”²⁶⁸

So much so that for an appropriate development of the Christian life we must not neglect either of these two dimensions.

“Those who are too easily satisfied with an outward participation in liturgical action would need to learn to deepen their prayer in silence, just as those who have a too individual conception of prayer would do well to learn the value of a prayer which is also in brotherly and

²⁶³ RV, *Lettres aux fraternités I*, p. 206.

²⁶⁴ Cf. RV, *Relations interpersonnelles avec Dieu*, p. 83.

²⁶⁵ RV, *Retraite au Vatican*, p. 81.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

²⁶⁷ RV, *Entretiens sur la vie religieuse*, p. 136.

²⁶⁸ RV, *Relations interpersonnelles avec Dieu*, p. 71.

sisterly communion, fulfilling this word of the Lord: 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there in the midst of them' (Mt. 18:20)."²⁶⁹

As for the significance of the Eucharist for the *personal prayer* of the Christian, R. Voillaume found that, in the last century, the Eucharist was the "object of a more individualistic devotion, to the point that communion appeared to be sentimentally detached from the sacrifice and that benediction of the Blessed Sacrament took precedence over Mass. *'Now we are coming back to a more accurate conception of the Eucharistic Mystery as sacrifice, but with a tendency to reject every other form of veneration of this divine presence.'*"²⁷⁰

A little further on he added that as far as our personal prayer is concerned, "the presence of the Eucharist in the tabernacle is, for the poor people we are, a reference point for our faith in Jesus and our love of him. It is like the cloister for Christians living in the world, their place of encounter with the Lord. Where can we go to find a sign of the presence of God, a sign that encourages us to pray and is a help for us in reaching the presence of God in a world that bears less and less signs of this presence? Because our eyes see nothing, this sign of the Sacred Host arouses our faith, and at the same time, it is like the starting point of our prayer."²⁷¹

He observed, therefore, that Jesus, in instituting the Eucharist, did not just have in mind to perpetuate his sacrifice and to give himself as life-giving food, but also "to procure for the weakness of our faith a permanent presence linked to the concrete sign of the Consecrated Host. The Eucharist is the center of liturgical life. In the silence of more intimate adoration, is it not also nourishment for our contemplation of the Lord?"²⁷²

"Of course, we must get used to praying everywhere and in all circumstances, but we must tell ourselves that for prolonged prayer we need an atmosphere that leads to prayer. This is when we need to remember how important the presence of the Holy Eucharist is in introducing us into a silent time of union with Christ. This is a universally established experiential fact. Besides, to be aware of this you only have to note how cold and empty churches or other places of worship seem to us when they are deprived of this sacramental presence. Such an atmosphere is not very conducive to prayer because it lacks a concrete, localized sign of the presence of God. We need this sign because we are poor. From this point of view Christ was more of a psychologist and more understanding of the true needs of humankind than some theologians who claim to deny the helpfulness and appropriateness of this sacramental presence."²⁷³

Prayer in daily life

–Life and prayer: in search of unity

As Fr. Voillaume pointed out, we all too often observe the difficulty of achieving a true *unity of life* in which the Christian's prayer and daily activities blend together harmoniously.

Yet we must strive to ensure that our prayer tends to "become a spiritual attitude that is prolonged in action."²⁷⁴ However, we must not lose sight of the fact that love is the only bond which in this sense can establish unity in us "and most especially between prayer and action."²⁷⁵

²⁶⁹ RV, *Où est votre foi?*, p. 119-120.

²⁷⁰ RV, *Retraite au Vatican*, p. 100.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 101-102.

²⁷² RV, *Relations interpersonnelles avec Dieu*, p. 22.

²⁷³ *Ibid.* p. 85-86.

²⁷⁴ RV, *Où est votre foi ?*, p. 138.

²⁷⁵ RV, *Au cœur des masses*, p. 244.

“The source of love is in that part of your soul where the bonds of this unique friendship with Jesus are forged. That love will well up in your heart and flow forth upon all humankind. [...] Desire this love with all your heart. Let this desire dwell like a continual prayer in the depths of your being, as if you were before Jesus in such a way that he can teach you little by little to feel what he feels. To establish these dispositions in your soul you must collaborate generously with him.”²⁷⁶

–Continual prayer

Prolonged prayer gradually gets the soul used to the continual presence of God and *continual prayer* “is one of its fruits.”²⁷⁷ But we must understand exactly what this means: “It is certainly not a question of making unbridled efforts to think continually of [God]; rather it is a peaceful state in which we are spontaneously inclined to act in a Gospel-like manner. It is a sort of loving presence with all the attitudes of soul beatified by Christ in the Sermon on the Mount. In continual prayer, the face of Christ is sufficiently imprinted in us to make us act constantly in a manner conformable to his spirit.”²⁷⁸

This “sort of watchfulness of the heart is a real state of contemplation.”²⁷⁹ Thus, it is not the fruit of an effort to fix our attention at the same time on God and on our exterior activity.

Moreover, such an effort would not be able to attain its objective except for brief moments. “We must not even pursue it as an ideal, as it may result in nervous tension or discouragement. Only God can place in us the habit of a vague contemplative way of seeing which is a true attention of the soul to God, but without our doing, and leaving us totally free to act.”²⁸⁰

Fr. Voillaume added that in this state, when we interrupt action to go to pray, we have a sort of certainty of never being far from the gaze of God. It all happens as if we were simply removing a veil that was preventing a state, already existing in depth, from ascending to clear consciousness so that it could be made explicit. At that time, “we become aware of it, but the reality was already there.”²⁸¹ “From this comes that security, freedom, and peace which we experience as being of God, no matter what he asks us to do.”²⁸²

On the other hand, he maintained that those who are introduced into this state possess greater freedom in regards to moments devoted exclusively to God and can respond to them with total availability because they perceive the calls to love with greater clarity and sensitivity.²⁸³

But he warned that such a state of freedom is only achieved under the action of the Holy Spirit. He said that there are two signs that show whether persons are actually in this situation or not: “first, they have a constant desire for prayer, a desire which is effective because it really pushes them to go to pray whenever there is a possibility to do so”; and secondly, “when these persons begin to pray, even in the midst of a very agitated life, [they] find themselves immediately in the presence of God as if they had never left it.”²⁸⁴

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 396.

²⁷⁷ RV, *Relations interpersonnelles avec Dieu*, p. 88.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 88-89

²⁷⁹ RV, *Lettres aux fraternités I*, p. 214.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁸¹ RV, *Des rapports entre la vie active et la vie contemplative ou entre prière et action*, p. 772.

²⁸² RV, *Lettres aux fraternités I*, p. 214

²⁸³ Cf. RV, *Des rapports entre la vie active et la vie contemplative ou entre prière et action*, p. 772.

²⁸⁴ RV, *Relations interpersonnelles avec Dieu*, p. 88.

From that moment on, those who find themselves in this situation “may no longer feel the moments of prayer as means of obtaining what they already possess, but they will continue to desire them as an imperious and gratuitous need of love.”²⁸⁵

R. Voillaume recalled that, in this sense, the example of Jesus himself is significant:

“Our Lord had absolutely no need to retreat to the desert to contemplate his Father, and yet he went there often and for prolonged periods of time. It would be very presumptuous for us to think that, since we are deeply united to the Lord, we no longer need the desert! Besides, that would be impossible because the more we are genuinely united to the Lord, the more we desire to be alone with him. Persons in this state cannot do otherwise than desire solitude with God, and if they do not follow through with this it’s because they must not do so, due to authentic motives of charity - like the Lord who would go out into the desert at night, while the whole day he let himself be taken up with people. He fled from the crowd, but only at night. [...] We must therefore resist this recent tendency to believe that diffused prayer dispenses us from prayer in the strict sense of the term.”²⁸⁶

He noted that sometimes “we speak of diffused prayer when it is really only a question of action done out of love.”²⁸⁷

–The need for a rhythm of alternation

Contemplation can lead us to that unity of life so many persons aspire to today. However, “to remain realistic and not delude ourselves, let us humbly acknowledge that all we can do is to *strive* for this unity. We must learn in what direction to walk but knowing that not everyone will reach this unity here below. It is like two lines that are nearly vertical although inclined towards each other: the smaller the angle of inclination, the faster they will overlap. The essential is that we do everything we can to make these two lines come closer together. It will depend on the Lord and his will whether they will overlap in this world or in the hereafter, when God will call us to himself at a time we do not know.”²⁸⁸

In this yearning for unity, there are some people who – mistakenly – come to dream of a “*psychological* unity on the level of everyday life, in the sense that they would like to have the *feeling of unity in their life*.”²⁸⁹ And even if it remains quite clear that, as we have already said, the Holy Spirit can realize in us a unification of a superior order which can have repercussions in a certain psychological unity, we must however accept the necessity to alternate times of solitude and reflection with times devoted to external action. In any case, this *rhythm of alternation* is necessary for everyone, even, as we have also seen, for those who, with the help of the Holy Spirit, have reached this state of inner unification and this freedom of soul we have spoken about.

“This alternation is thus like a human law, a way of acting that is fully in conformity with human nature. We must not therefore want to resolve this need for unity on the psychological level. For all of us it is a question of establishing an equilibrium in our life between this double vital requirement of action and contemplation, an equilibrium in keeping with our vocation,

²⁸⁵ RV, *Des rapports entre la vie active et la vie contemplative ou entre prière et action*, p. 772.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 772-773.

²⁸⁷ RV, *Retraite au Vatican*, p. 74.

²⁸⁸ RV, *Relations interpersonnelles avec Dieu*, p. 57.

²⁸⁹ RV, *Des rapports entre la vie active et la vie contemplative ou entre prière et action*, p. 765.

Le premier soulignement est de nous, le second est de l’auteur.

with the duty of our state in life, and which is also in keeping with our spiritual vocation as well as the action of the Holy Spirit.”²⁹⁰

3 – The Prayer of the Poor

Fr. Voillaume affirmed on numerous occasions that the Little Brothers of Jesus were called to live the evangelical perfection of their religious life “in the conditions of life in which others must live their Christian life.”²⁹¹ That’s why, in his opinion, “one of the consequences of the religious life of the Little Brothers is precisely to demonstrate, by actually living it, that authentic contemplative prayer can be realized in the same conditions of life as those of salaried manual workers who bear most heavily the consequences of civilization’s technological advances.”²⁹²

To which he added:

“Our prayer is of the same nature as that Jesus asks *of everyone*, of all poor sinners. We must strive for it with all our faith. Jesus cannot make fun of poor people and if He requires something of us, it’s because it *is possible* with his help.”²⁹³

That is why the lived experiences of the fraternities is a particularly important contribution to the people of our times.²⁹⁴

After several years of the fraternities being inserted in the working class, Fr. Voillaume considered drawing some conclusions as to the paths God can take to lead someone to prayer in such conditions of life. He wondered therefore:

“Is it possible for the majority of people who are poor, who are condemned to daily labor, to be faithful to the Lord’s precept on prayer? Can they be united to God? Can they pray to Him? That’s why the experience of the fraternities and the response we can give to this question interests everyone.”²⁹⁵

We could object that, when you get right down to it, this was not the first time that spiritual masters have told lay folks that it is possible to pray in secular life. R.Voillaume recognized this. St Francis de Sales in his *Introduction to the Devout Life* had already taught the practice of prayer in the lay life. And to this must be added a whole pious movement which gave birth to families with a true spirit of prayer, families that produced saints. He added that such was the case of Saint Theresa of the Child Jesus.²⁹⁶ However, he felt that we must take a look at something:

“All this is the fruit of a sanctity that was presented to lay persons, but it must be said that it was for laity who could arrange their life so as to accommodate certain conditions of a life of prayer. And that’s why, if you reflect a bit, it was practically only in the well-to-do and bourgeois circles that this effort of a life of prayer developed. Do you think that among the

²⁹⁰ RV, *Retraite au Vatican*, p. 92.

²⁹¹ RV, *Au cœur des masses*, p. 39.

²⁹² RV, *Lettres aux fraternités I*, p. 314-315.

²⁹³ RV, *Au cœur des masses*, p. 101.

²⁹⁴ Cf. J. et R. MARITAIN, *Liturgie et contemplation*, dans *Œuvres complètes 14*, Éditions universitaires, Fribourg Suisse/ Éditions Saint-Paul Paris, 1993, p. 139.

²⁹⁵ RV, *La prière dans la vie*, p. 4. Cf. *Au cœur des masses*, p. 87. But over and beyond what is common, it must always be borne in mind that the life of the Little Brothers is the realization of a form of religious life which, as such, has its own identity and its own requirements.

²⁹⁶ cf. RV, *Retraite à la Fraternité séculière IV - Nazareth*, p. 4.

poor and working people it was thought that there were conditions conducive to the development of a life of contemplative [prayer]?

What is essentially new is this: taking human life just as it is. Due to labor laws, this portion of humankind is not made up of people with leisure time to spend in long hours of silent and peaceful prayer and a lot of reading. Rather they are subjected to harsh working conditions and suffer the consequences [...] while living in the midst of the world, in the full sense of the word, with a life of work like Jesus in Nazareth. It is this life of work that is going to be the very material of their perfection, and we are going to sow seeds of contemplative [prayer] life into it.”²⁹⁷

The situation of the poor

Rene Voillaume observed that we can attest to the difficulties usually encountered by people who seek to pray in the midst of a life of work, misery and fatigue. First of all, they suffer exhaustion with all its consequences: “When they want to go pray in the evening, after a day of work, they say their minds are blank.”²⁹⁸ Added to this is the fact that they are usually overwhelmed with worries, suffering, and contact with sin. Let us also add the influence of the nerve-wracking rhythm characteristic of modern life. And if we take into account the fact that often the time available to them is devoured by others, we can wonder to what extent a path of prayer can exist in the midst of all that.

“Is it possible to reach a deep level of prayer or, in other words, are we able to become fully Christian under these conditions? By a process of deduction, I would dare say that we must answer ‘yes’ without hesitation. We cannot imagine God condemning the masses of poor people, those whom he preferred, to not being united to Him in the act of love that is prayer and in their desire to encounter Him.”²⁹⁹

But R. Voillaume added that this presupposes that we teach them “to make use of the path which is both imposed on and offered them,”³⁰⁰ because too often we discourage them by imposing conditions for praying that are unrealizable in the context of their lives.

“Yes, it must be said that God can use other paths to lead a soul to prayer and we must know of these paths so we can go and encounter God working there.”³⁰¹

The path of the poor

a) First of all, Fr.Voillaume indicated that you must decide to pray, doing so with the confidence that the Lord is at the end of the journey. Then it is necessary “*to go straight ahead along the obscure path of faith in order to meet up with God working there*” beyond all images and through the night.³⁰²

But to achieve this, the soul must be worked on. In the cloister the work by which God carries out this self-detachment or stripping includes experiencing various forms of prayer. Poor people cannot take this path. Rather, they must jump immediately into faith, offering the very nudity of their being to the action of the Holy Spirit. This will require great courage.

²⁹⁷ RV, *Retraite à la Fraternité séculière IV - Nazareth*, p. 4. What we added to the text in brackets is an effort to reflect the original meaning of the term “contemplative life” more accurately and as suggested by the context.

²⁹⁸ RV, *La prière dans la vie*, p. 7.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*

³⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 8.

The poor “will hang on in faith. If they have the patience to await God’s action, I am sure that it will come. [...] We cannot repeat enough that prayer requires much courage. Mental and physical weariness, suffering, contact with sin, all that is found in the life of the poor, can serve in the process of detachment, if they wish, deepening it on the inner level. And when they will have to make the effort to maintain themselves in this state before God, their effort will produce an emptiness in them that God will use as an ultimate preparation for the nameless union.”³⁰³

Rene Voillaume recalled that it is rare, even in the cloister, that the secret work of God does not use exterior agents to carry out its work of purification. We have proof of this in the lives of saints. He takes the example of Saint Theresa: to sanctify her and to detach her from all that was not God, God made use of her sisters in religion and many events in the life of the convent.³⁰⁴

“Are there not also many things in the life of the poor which are there to divest their souls? We must sometimes know how to sink ourselves into these conditions of existence and tell ourselves that by offering ourselves to this harshness, this darkness, we are going out to meet a work of God. God can then make use of this poverty of means for the interior emptying and bringing of the soul to union with God. If the essential poverty, that is, being stripped bare interiorly, is truly an evangelical value, if it is an eminent value which predisposes us to receive God, if this is true it must be said that the lives of the poor must not put them in an unfavorable situation for union with God.”³⁰⁵

However, Fr. Voillaume said that there are certain limits in the order of the hardness of life, certain worries and fatigue which cannot be exceeded without making a person incapable of living for God. Some types of work and a certain degree of misery are so inhuman that they can prevent someone from living in a Christian way and being able to pray.³⁰⁶

“You understand how difficult it is to believe in such a destiny [that of attaining true intimacy with God here below] when we see here on earth the number of people who are not even capable of practicing elemental moral law because of the misery to which they are subjected and the conditions in which they live. Even more so, a very large number of people do not possess the minimum conditions required to be able to indulge in contemplative prayer. This situation tempts us to be scandalized. The salvation of each person and the growth of love is such a secret. Some souls seem destined to attain the fullness of love here below, while others will only be up to attaining it when they enter what is beyond this life.”³⁰⁷

b) Rene Voillaume argued that there is a second factor which must find its place in the lives of the poor to make this life of prayer possible. And that is to establish at least a weekly rhythm of alternation with times of desert.³⁰⁸ We must understand the reasons why this rhythm is necessary:

“Using a life that is hard and knocked about as a means for moving towards divine union involves risks. The external silence imposed on monks only has value if it produces and accentuates inner silence which is none other than detachment, peace of soul, and availability to divine action. If we want to achieve this availability through means procured in a worker’s life, we need to have control over whether or not we are dominated by material things. The

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 8-9.

³⁰⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*

³⁰⁷ RV, *Relations interpersonnelles avec Dieu*, p. 46.

³⁰⁸ Cf. RV, *La prière dans la vie*, p. 10.

rhythm of weekly silence will allow us this control and a looking back at ourselves, because it is good to take a look at ourselves from time to time. And then, besides prayer, it will allow for reflection on and deepening of the realities attained by faith.”³⁰⁹

But, R. Voillaume warned that we must avoid thinking, as some do, that these retreats are like a reservoir that we fill and then empty during the week. This is a false image, for it would be tantamount to saying that one lives fully only during these times of silence and desert, while one’s normal life represents a descent.³¹⁰

“The true image is that of the living body that is subjected to a rhythm of rest and exercise. We know only too well that people who rest all the time grow weak. We also know that those who engage unhesitatingly in sports or in violent exercise wear themselves out if they don’t take rest periods. If exercise and rest are harmoniously organized, the living being develops in exercise and rest.

Persons who hand themselves over to God’s will, offering themselves in their very conditions of work, poverty, weariness, and of others overcrowding their lives, must not be afraid, even if the daily rhythm of their prayer is not always respected. They advance towards God and there is not for them a lessening of their life of union with God if they know how to use everything. On the contrary, there is the possibility of a true preparation for prayer if not meditation.”³¹¹

Finally, Fr. Voillaume insisted once more that “to learn how to pray one must simply pray and pray a lot, and know how to begin over and over again indefinitely, without getting tired,” even if we perceive no apparent results.³¹² Because, he added, if Jesus insisted so much on perseverance, it is surely because he knew how very difficult it would be for us.³¹³

“The only difficulty with prayer really is the lack of perseverance. When you come right down to it, there are no other real difficulties. We must have the courage to pray even if it does not seem to bring us anything. To encounter God, it is enough to offer oneself in the nakedness of faith. We must go to meet him stripped and with courage. I think that’s the path for those who cannot find God otherwise.”³¹⁴

“Prayer is a tough task. We must decide to go to the end of it, to hold on to the very end. If we don’t have the courage to do so, it’s useless. But don’t say that we don’t have the necessary conditions in our life for praying.”³¹⁵

Conclusion

As we have seen, Fr. Voillaume maintained that contemplation belongs to the perfection of Christian life to which all the baptized have been called.

The experience of the fraternities – of leading a life of prayer in conditions similar to those that make up the daily life of the majority of the poor – helps to show that even the poor have the possibility of developing this contemplative dimension of Christian life. And they bear witness not only to this *possibility* but also to the *paths* that must be traveled by those who, living in this situation, want to go to meet the Lord with a genuine thirst of contemplation. In

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³¹⁰ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 11-12.

³¹² RV, *Au cœur des masses*, p. 125.

³¹³ *Ibid.*

³¹⁴ RV, *La prière dans la vie*, p. 12.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

the teachings of Fr. Voillaume, which have enlightened this prayer experience of the fraternities even as it unfolded, we find at the same time a reflection of the fruits that it can produce.

Moreover, the guidelines on the practice of prayer that Rene Voillaume formulated for laity and religious of all kinds – together with what he said to the fraternities - form an articulated whole which creates a teaching that is particularly clear and balanced. In this chapter, we wanted to highlight this by bringing together all that he has set forth throughout the years concerning the path of prayer.

CONCLUSION

The teachings of Fr. Voillaume on prayer that I have tried to present throughout this book, with his personal history and that of the fraternities as backdrop, have, in my opinion, a special value and significance for the spiritual life of the men and women of our day. In the current context of renewal in spiritual research and interest in prayer, it was particularly necessary to position my work in the rich spiritual tradition of Christianity. This should help free this research from the various “mirages” offered to postmodern men and women by various narcissistic experiences which do not favor their growth in love, love being the very place and sign par excellence of spiritual maturity.

The teachings of Fr. Voillaume are expressed in the language of today and deal with concerns close to the mentality of our times. In this sense they appear to us to be appropriate and welcome. They present the best of traditional doctrine about the path of prayer, *applying it* to the concrete and often seemingly unfavorable conditions in which today’s men and women must tackle this search.

We must also note the witness of the fraternities to the *possibility* of disposing oneself to contemplative prayer in the living conditions of the poor and on the *roads* and the contribution this represents for our current world.³¹⁶

For the sake of the life of the ecclesial community, it is also worth pointing out the originality hidden in the contemplative life of the fraternities. In fact, according to Hans Urs von Balthasar, it constitutes one of those “forms which, although deeply rooted in Tradition and in the supratemporal essence of the Church, are experienced as something new and striking, an authentic work of the Spirit.”³¹⁷ As we have seen, it was Rene Voillaume who, even while the physiognomy proper to the fraternities was still taking shape, formulated the main lines that constitute their spirituality.

Finally, we can point out the contribution which the experience of the fraternities has made, in more than one aspect, to the renewal of consecrated life in the second half of the twentieth century.³¹⁸

For all these reasons, we thought it might be particularly interesting to make the testimony of these disciples of Charles de Foucauld available, as well as the teachings that Rene Voillaume formulated for the Little Brothers and for all who seek a contemplative encounter with the Lord as they journey.

³¹⁶ Cf. E. LÓPEZ, *¿Es posible la contemplación hoy? Cuáles han de ser los caminos para llegar a la contemplación sobrenatural*, dans *Contemplación. Primer Congreso Nacional de Vida Contemplativa*, Madrid 1973, p. 84-85.

³¹⁷ Hans URS VON BALTHASAR, *Ensayos Teológicos*, 1, Madrid 1964, p. 284.

³¹⁸ Cf. Th. MATURA, *Quelle vie religieuse pour demain ? Vie Consacrée* 52, 1980, p. 241-242.

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