

Passionate for God and humanity: Pope Francis and the great intuitions of Charles de Foucauld.

“It is by loving people that we learn to love God”
(Charles de Foucauld)

1. Charles de Foucauld: Witness for our time?

We are commemorating the centenary of Brother Charles' death. A century has passed since that afternoon of December the first, that saw fall, in the sands of the Sahara, the wounded body of the universal brother, the friend of the Tuaregs, the Marabout of the red heart.¹ That one who, by sharing the vulnerability of their neighbours, was hit directly by the violence in the environment. Since then, despite the apparent failure of a life ended in solitude and abandonment, his testimony has continued to impact the lives of countless men and women and inspired many initiatives. Through all of them, we have tried to propose a particular way of living our relationship with God and humanity: appreciating the everyday as a place of divine manifestation, closeness to the poor and openness to universal brotherhood. In the twentieth century the Dominican Yves Congar recognized the strength of Brother Charles' testimonial, seeing in him one of “the beacons lit by God on the threshold of the atomic century”²: a light of hope, manifested as a calling to be followed, in a century marked by injustice, division and war. It is in this sense that the theologian Ludwig Kaufman liked to establish a close link between the figures of Foucauld, John XXIII and Bishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, presenting them as authentic expressions of Christianity for the future.³ At the beginning of the third millennium, how can the testimony of Brother Charles still be seen as a current example for our time?

Apart from the formality, the beatification of Charles de Foucauld, in November 2005, reminds us that the testimony of the blessed can become a real source of inspiration for the life of those who follow Jesus' footsteps. As for our Brother Charles, the broad outlines of his life remain significant in a world that is reluctant to abandon the culture of selfishness, violence and exclusion. It is indeed this perspective that Pope Francis demonstrates, when referring explicitly to the person of Foucauld, recognizing him as a true "apostle of kindness," an example of fraternal closeness to the poorest and most abandoned.⁴ It is important to note that these words are not expressed as part of a widespread praise of the virtues of Blessed Carlos. In them are reflected the feeling of someone who knows him and is convinced that this particular way of proclaiming the Gospel has become more topical at this time. It should be noted that the first encounter between Francis and the figure of Charles de Foucauld are placed in the context of Latin American church history in the second half of the twentieth century. During this period Fraternities, through their different facets, were becoming present in various countries

1 Marabout is a term used in Muslim tradition to speak of a godly man or to refer to someone wise and respectable.

2 Quoted by J. J. ANTIER, “Charles de Foucauld”, (Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1997) pg 16.

3 L. KAUFMAN, “Three Pioneers of Tomorrow's Future Christianity” (USCC, 1986) 203 p.

4 Speech on the eve of the opening of the Synod of the family.

in the region, revealing the fate of the poorest. Without attempting to define the personal impact this could have on the spiritual life of the Jesuit Bergoglio, we can say that during his ministry, especially as Archbishop of Buenos Aires, the opportunities to share closely with Fraternities were never missed.⁵ This contributed in some way to generate a certain proximity between him and the spiritual path inspired by Foucauld, a relationship that is evident in some of his recent speeches. However, it is not only his words, but also his attitudes that allow us to establish some links between them. Before addressing some of the texts which Francisco quotes regarding Foucauld, it is well worth deepening certain aspects of his practice that are in perfect harmony with the intuitions of Brother Charles.

2. Opening to the encounter and calling to the periphery.

One of the many gestures that mark the ministry of Pope Francisco is his constant willingness to encounter, expressed especially through the pursuit of dialogue. We have seen, on many occasions, before delivering a pre-set speech, Francisco prefers to be attentive to his audience. Far from being an anecdotal aspect, this attitude is deeply linked to the way of understanding the process of evangelization, knowing that it cannot ignore the path of sincere dialogue and respect for others.⁶ This is not to impose unilaterally a host of doctrinal or legal principles, but to propose that “the Gospel invites us, above all, to respond to a God who loves us and saves us, recognizing Him in others and in ourselves, so as to look for the good of all”.⁷ Encountering the ‘other’ implies entering an authentic relationship with him, deeply appreciating his reality, his history, his life. Discover in him or her, a brother or sister through whom God has a word to say. This concern is reflected in the words of Francis addressed to priests, seminarian, and religious brothers / sisters in Rio de Janeiro:

To be called by Jesus, to be called to evangelize (...) to be called to promote the culture of encounter (...) I would like you to be almost obsessed about this. Be so without being presumptuous, imposing “our truths”, but rather be guided by the humble yet joyful certainty of those who have been found, touched and transformed by the Truth who is Christ, ever to be proclaimed. (cf. Lk 24:13-35).⁸

About a century before, the evangelical concept of Charles de Foucauld was part of this same line emphasizing the need for a close relationship with people, before putting any other initiative of missionary character into practice: "You will know the people, and you will allow that they know you" - he said to his friend Louis Massignon. "You will not speak to them of dogmas, but make yourself beloved by them and you will make friends with them all".⁹ In fact, at the beginning of his conversion,

5 The presence of the Little Sisters of Jesus since 1957, the arrival of the Little Brothers of Jesus, the testimony of secular fraternities, the memory of Mauricio Silva, Little Brother of the Gospel killed by the dictatorship and the emergence of priestly fraternity underscore the deeply rooted of this spiritual path in place.

6 *Evangelii Gaudium* 238.

7 *Evangelii Gaudium* 39.

8 Homily in the Cathedral of Rio de Janeiro, July 27, 2013.

9 Letter to Louis Massignon, September 19, 1911.

the transforming power of other realities lived by him had been a deeply meaningful experience. It reflects his own words when he writes: "Islam impressed me deeply. Contemplating the faith of those souls living in the continual presence of God, made me discover that there is something larger and more real than mundane occupations ".¹⁰ Thereafter, this first contact with the other, lived from the simplicity of friendship, would be considered by Foucauld as a primary way of evangelization. This would enable the followers of Jesus to display at all times a true witness of evangelical life, transformed by the goodness and closeness of a living Gospel to those around them.¹¹

The desire to make the kind face of God present raised new questions and new challenges in Foucauld's life. In April 1905, in a letter to Father Caron he wrote: "Where should I go? There, where Jesus would go, to the furthest sheep, the most abandoned. It is not about going where the land is holy but where the souls are in greater need".¹² There is indeed another concern emerging: the fate of the farthest ones. While he was searching to give a new meaning to the desire of living the life of Nazareth, beyond the limits of the town where his Master lived, Brother Charles was concerned to find the simple life close to the weakest and the most abandoned people. In his meditations he writes: "We must love all men, but even more we must bow to those whom the world has forgotten, the neglected, the marginalized, the little one, the poor, the suffering". Encouraged by this realization, he decides to take the road to the marginalized, to share life there where Jesus could be known, not through large missionary campaigns, but through concrete attitudes that reflected better than words the closeness of the Good God.

The call of Pope Francis inviting us to move to the periphery has made it possible, in a way, to actualize this distinctive feature of the life of Charles de Foucauld. In fact, one of the aspects that he has most insisted on during his pastoral ministry was his deep commitment to the poorest and most remote.¹³ For Francis, the need to go to the "existential peripheries" does not correspond to the presentation of an abstract discourse about human existence, nor is it a proselytizing attempt to attract the attention of new members to the church. The existence of which the Pope speaks is that manifested in the concrete life of every day, especially that which is expressed in humanity's flesh wounded by poverty, injustice and exclusion. While it is true that this understanding is rooted in the praxis of Jesus, it also draws on the Latin American theological and spiritual tradition. Through it, it is able to give continuity to the call of the Second Vatican Council which reminds us that nothing that touches the human being, especially the poorest, may be foreign to Christ's disciples.¹⁴ In the same vein, the Latin American reflection has been able to make note that the suffering face of Christ continues questioning humanity today.¹⁵ If the Pope sets his sights on the periphery, he does so as a disciple of Jesus, letting himself be questioned by an

10 Letter to Henri de Castries, August 14, 1901.

11 Charles de Foucauld, *Conseils évangéliques. Directoire*. Paris : Editions du Seuil, 1961, p. 78.

12 Letter to P. Caron, April 8, 1905.

13 *Evangelii Gaudium* 197 -201.

14 *Gaudium et Spes* 1.1

existence that speaks of bread, work, illness, rejection, life, death, dignity, justice; concerns that, on more than one occasion, hit the heart of Foucauld. He expressed this in his reaction to the scourge of slavery: “it is a shameful immorality to see young people stolen four or five years ago, taken from their families in Sudan, retained by force by their owners, and the French authorities, an accomplice in these abductions (...) No economic or political reason can allow such immorality and injustice to exist”.¹⁶

3. The salvific dimension of everyday realities: Francis' word about Charles.

If Francis' gestures and attitudes remind us of some aspects that have come through the thoughts and actions of Brother Charles, the way he presents them is oriented in the same direction. Speaking to the priests on the missionary challenge of today's Church, the Pope recognizes the uniqueness of the evangelizing mission of the Saharan method: “I think of Blessed Charles de Foucauld. What did he do? He gave testimony, a testimony that cut across his life and continues to move hearts today.”¹⁷ Indeed, it not only extols his personal qualities, but puts us in touch with the announcement of the Good News, in the midst of situations that affect humanity, especially when it comes to the poor and marginalized. This is the perspective in which various interventions fall concerning Foucauld. In this regard, two texts catch our attention: The *Laudato Si'* Encyclical and the speech on the eve of the opening of the second stage of the Synod on the family.

In the third chapter of the encyclical, critically presenting the different effects caused by the exaltation of a technocratic paradigm and the excessive anthropocentrism, the Pope highlights the role that these elements play in the ecological imbalance. This is understood not only as a break with the natural environment but also as an expression of the breakdown in relationships between human beings themselves. It is in this context that the question of work is addressed, as a reality that expresses particularly the imbalances caused by the interests of an unjust economic system and the consequences of the misconceptions of technological progress. The fair valuation of work, in its broadest sense, is then presented as a fundamental aspect to contribute to the development of a comprehensive understanding of ecology, to help reverse these dehumanizing situations. Only in this way, can we contribute to the search for human fulfillment by enabling the entire created environment to give the best of itself. It is in this perspective that the figure of Brother Charles is highlighted, as expressed in the encyclical: “Together with the awe-filled contemplation of creation which we find in Saint Francis of Assisi, the Christian spiritual tradition has also developed a rich and balanced understanding of the meaning of work, as, for example, in the life of Blessed Charles de Foucauld and his followers.”¹⁸

Foucauld's testimony is taken as an expression of the contemplative potential that allows delving into the different realities of history to recover the depth of what God wants, highlighting the need for

15 Puebla 31-40.

16 Letter to Henri de Castres, January 15, 1902.

17 Spiritual Exercises, June 12, 2015

18 *Laudato Si'* 125.

his project to be completed. In other words, the life of Brother Charles and the options of his “disciples” are presented as an invitation to rediscover the salvific dimension of the daily realities in which key aspects are played out and that contribute to the "full and abundant life" that Jesus wants. It is in this sense that the intervention carried out on the eve of the Synod on the family is orientated. That speech evokes the continuing desire of Charles de Foucauld to become brother with the weakest, in the last place, learning to discover with them the value of simple realities as a place in which God speaks. This follows from the words of Francis when he says: “Through his fraternal closeness and his solidarity with the poor and the abandoned, he (Foucauld) came to understand that it is they who evangelize us, they who help us to grow in humanity”.¹⁹ This interpretation is the key, opening the possibility of focusing his eyes on the model of Nazareth, not in an idealistic sense, but by setting up a pattern of imitation, between the everyday life of the Family of Nazareth and the various situations that families live today. Pope Francisco explains:

To understand the family today, we too need to enter - like Charles de Foucauld – into the mystery of the family of Nazareth, into its quiet daily life, not unlike that of most families, with their problems and their simple joys, a life marked by serene patience amid adversity, respect for others, a humility which is freeing and which flowers in service, a life of fraternity rooted in the sense that we are all members of one body²⁰

More than a distant and impossible model to follow, the Family of Nazareth then becomes a source of inspiration that allows families of our time to value themselves and be valued in the depths of their lives, with all its complexities and hopes. Foucauld’s capacity to allow the mystery of the hidden life of Nazareth to impact upon him, serves as a reference for learning to discover from our own realities, the simple and mysterious presence of God, through stories that are woven into the heart of humanity.

If Pope Francisco has seen in the life of Charles de Foucauld a valid testimony for our times, he does it by putting his figure on the dynamic relationship between life and the specific concerns of men and women today. This reminds us that the essence of this spiritual proposal is open to humanity, especially suffering humanity. “It is by loving people that we learn to love God”, Foucauld said in one of his letters.²¹ In this way, the apostolate of friendship and universal brotherhood will always continue to cultivate a spirit of decentralization and ongoing movement toward others. This attitude, that was a fundamental part of the life of Brother Charles, is currently one of the incessant calls that Francis promotes to believers: “Let us go forth, then, let us go forth to offer everyone the life of Jesus Christ. (...) I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security”.²²

19 [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/fr/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151003_veglia-xiv-
assemblea-sinodo.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/fr/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151003_veglia-xiv-assemblea-sinodo.html)

20 *Ibid.*

21 Letter to Louis Massignon, March 10, 1912.

One hundred years after the death of Charles de Foucauld, the great insights that come across from his life remain a real challenge for us today. This challenge becomes actual in the words and deeds of Francis, directly questioning the way of life of following Jesus and how to exercise the pastoral ministry, especially with regard to the accompaniment of the poor and excluded.

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