

Salaam

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Quarterly to Promote Understanding



A Ramzan Letter

United with Jesus Christ in silence:

Spirituality of Little Brothers of Jesus

God gave the growth: A Legacy of Charles de Foucauld

Charles de Foucauld, Louis Massignon,

Catholic Spirituality, and Islam

Charles de Foucauld: Acrobat of God without a Net

Brother Charles and the Visitation

Charles de Foucauld: A life in dialogue

The "Universal Brother" Blessed Charles de Foucauld:

His Life and Relevance Today

ISLAMIC STUDIES ASSOCIATION

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**“..... that they.....
may be one.....”**

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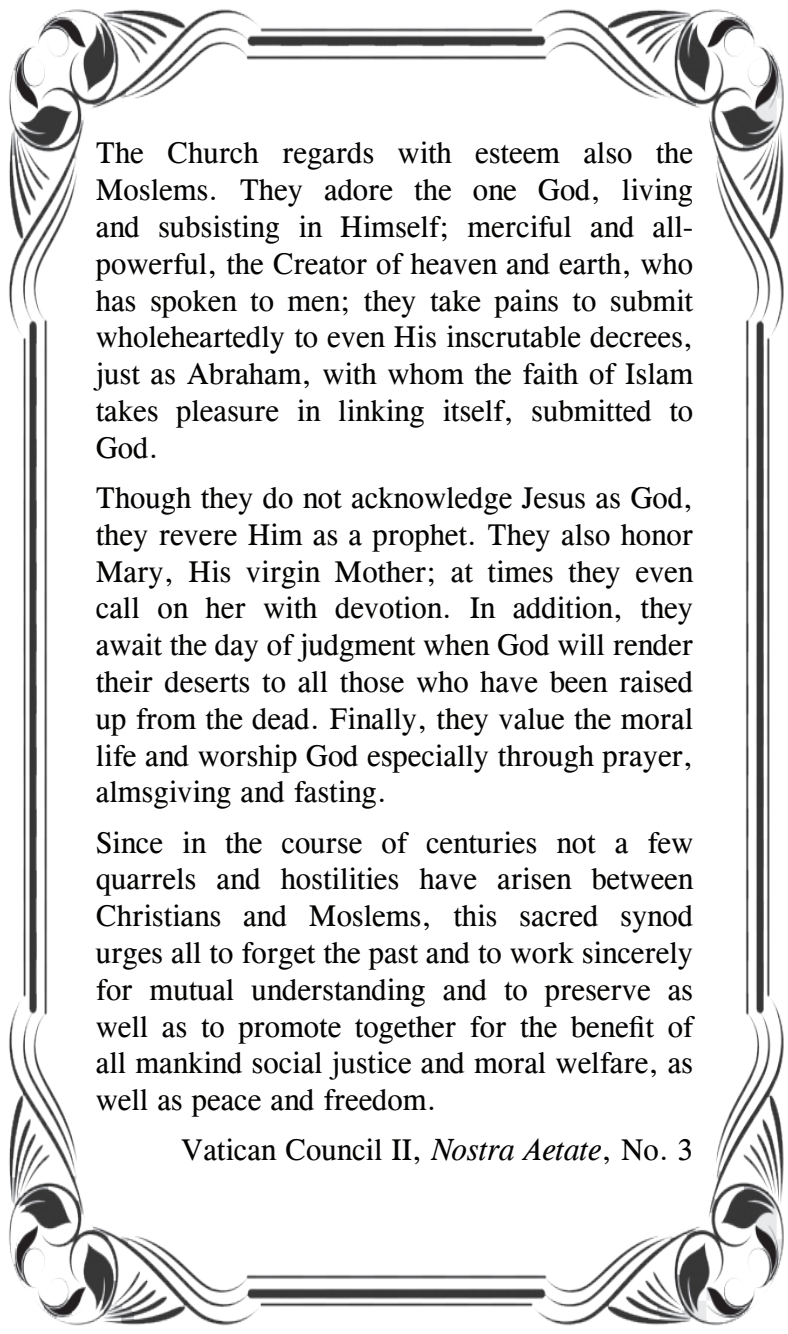
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The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God.

Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honor Mary, His virgin Mother; at times they even call on her with devotion. In addition, they await the day of judgment when God will render their deserts to all those who have been raised up from the dead. Finally, they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting.

Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Moslems, this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom.

Vatican Council II, *Nostra Aetate*, No. 3

Editorial

Dear brothers and sisters:

This issue is dedicated to Blessed Charles de Foucauld. Who was Charles de Foucauld? What inspiration does Foucauld bring to our contemporary times? Is someone born in the middle of the 19th century and who died in the second decade of the 20th Century in a remotest corner of human habitation relevant anyway to us, wherever we live?

Dear friends, at the very outset, I invite you to listen to the words of Cardinal Walter Caspar emphasizing the relevance and the exemplary nature of the testimony of Charles de Foucauld for Christians and Christianity in the world of today. He said: “Charles de Foucauld seemed interesting to me as a model for achieving the mission of Christians and of the Church not just in the desert of Tamanrasset but also in the desert of the modern world: the mission through simple Christian presence, in prayer with God and in friendship with men [women]”.

The vast expanses of the desert both can amaze us and frighten us. Both the silence and whistling winds can inspire us and raise one’s heart and mind towards our creator. The oases that one may find among the shifting sand dunes may fill one with hope. The words of Cardinal Caspar draws one’s attention to look at our inhabited world figuratively as a desert. Like sand dunes, men and women live disconnected with one another. While we are created to care for one another, we fail to nourish the ‘culture of care’. Foucauld lived the ‘culture of care’ as a universal brother by living as a brother to men and women on the deserts. By caring for the least he found a way to live a life of universal fraternity. He lived as a human oasis by his presence and friendship and we are called to live for others as oases in this world.

Moreover, I deeply believe that Foucauld invites us to live among Muslims as their brothers by our presence and friendship towards them. Foucauld’s life calls us to appreciate how many of our Muslim

brothers and sisters ‘continuously live in the presence of God’ our Creator and Master, drawing from the depths of our own faith. It is very painful to see how the richness and immense resources of the Islamic tradition are wasted, twisted and under attack these days.

Foucauld’s life ended in the desert in a painful way. It might appear to any reader that his life ended in a failure. He neither ‘converted’ anyone nor ‘attracted’ followers. His story was not a story of success in terms of the ‘missionary mindset’ of his times, even today for some. Reflecting on the apparent failure of Foucauld, Cardinal Walter Caspar says: “the Jewish philosopher and theologian Martin Buber has said that success is not one of the names of God. Jesus Christ also in his earthly life did not have success; at the end he died on the cross and his disciples, except John and his mother Mary, distanced themselves and abandoned him. Humanly speaking, Good Friday was a failure. The experience of Good Friday is a part of the life of every saint and every Christian”.

Foucauld was a hidden treasure for long until a few men and women began to follow his spirituality. Today several men and women follow his spirituality as religious and laity. These men and women bring to the world a new dimension of service with their presence, love, and care. Elsewhere what Pope Francis said in a conversation with Austin Ivereigh is applicable to the mission of the spiritual sons and daughters of Foucauld: “The Church’s role is played out in the service of the Lord and the peoples of the earth where she is sent, not by imposing or dominating but as Christ does, in the washing of feet”.

Moreover, many Christians neglect the importance of engagement with Muslims. They seem to think that Islam as a post-Christian revelation, at its best is a preparation for the Gospel or at its worst a decadent version of Christianity. In such a difficult situation, the example of Charles de Foucauld can be of great help to many Christians who engage with Muslims.

Further, the spirituality of Foucauld that shapes the life of a Christian to live among Muslims as their brother is necessarily an important ingredient to every Christian especially in India where anti-Muslim sentiments run high under the present government. Many

Christians often seem to join the bandwagon of the right wingers in whipping up anti-Muslim attitudes within ecclesial communities. Foucauldian spirituality demands that local churches must make explicit the kingdom values practiced by our Muslim brothers and sisters so that each church is a sacramental expression of what is salvific in Islam and Muslim spiritualities minus whatever is anti-kingdom in them.

I thank Cyril Antony SJ, Bonnie Bowman Thurston, Christian S. Krokus, Leo D. Lefebure, Little Sister Kathleen of Jesus, Marc Hayet, Mgr Claude Rault and Rita George Tvrtković for their contribution to this issue of *Salaam* as we honor Blessed Charles de Foucauld who has been cleared for canonization by the Congregation for the Causes of Saints.

Joseph Victor Edwin SJ

“Today we raise our voices in prayer to Almighty God for all the victims of war and armed conflict. Here in Mosul, the tragic consequences of war and hostility are all too evident. How cruel it is that this country, the cradle of civilization, should have been afflicted by so barbarous a blow, with ancient places of worship destroyed and many thousands of people – Muslims, Christians, Yazidis and others – forcibly displaced or killed! Today, however, we reaffirm our conviction that fraternity is more durable than fratricide, that hope is more powerful than hatred, that peace more powerful than war. This conviction speaks with greater eloquence than the passing voices of hatred and violence, and it can never be silenced by the blood spilled by those who pervert the name of God to pursue paths of destruction.”

Pope Francis at Mosul, Iraq, 7 March 2021

A RAMZAN LETTER TO MY MUSLIM SISTERS AND BROTHERS

Dear Muslim sisters and brothers,

Assalam Aleikum!

In the month of April this year we will celebrate the advent of the month of Ramzan. I consciously use the word ‘celebrate’, because I have personally experienced and seen Muslim friends—sisters and brothers—really looking forward to the fasting month of Ramzan.

Let me begin with an anecdote from my days in Aligarh (a postgraduate student in Islamic Studies at Aligarh Muslim University). On the day before the advent of the month of Ramzan in the year 2003, a Muslim journalist friend of mine, Shafi Munna, and I went for an evening stroll. There was a lot of expectation in the air. There were people in the streets and on rooftops trying to spot the crescent moon, waiting for the announcement of the commencement of the month of Ramzan. The thought came to my mind how intently these people were looking forward to seeing a sign of God—the crescent moon. It was really beautiful! I felt very happy for that great awareness—looking for a sign of God in Nature.

God is the Creator of all things, and, using the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins, a Jesuit poet, “the world is charged with the grandeur of God”. God’s signs are everywhere. One needs to pay attention to them to realise their significance.

I heard an announcement saying that the crescent moon had been sighted. Shafi and I looked in the direction of the moon. An elderly gentleman was before us. Two little children—a boy and a girl—were holding his hands. They were perhaps his grandchildren. The gentleman raised his hands in prayer. He said something, facing the crescent moon. I was moved to see the two little children also raise their hands in prayer. How wonderful it was that this grandfather was teaching, through his own example, these two little children to recognise a sign of God! Even these little children were aware of God! I felt very happy for that.

Dear friends, the Holy Quran says that fasting is prescribed for you. It is a means for developing God-consciousness. This is something very attractive for me. The month of Ramzan is about focussing on God-consciousness. To experience a deep experience of God-consciousness, fasting, prayer and charity are a means. They help us in awareness of the presence of God in the world.

So, God-consciousness is something that the Muslim tradition teaches me, including through the significance of the month of Ramzan in the lives of Muslims. The way Muslim brothers and sisters celebrate the month of Ramzan helps me grow in God-consciousness as a Christian.

Dear sisters and brothers, as a student of Christian-Muslim relations I have asked a number of Muslim sisters and brothers, ‘Why do you fast?’ Many of you have said that fasting is for purification, fasting is to please God, fasting is an act of obedience to God. Everything that you have said I know you are saying it from your own experience, because I know my Muslim friends and their deep faith in God and their commitment to God. For me, this is a very beautiful experience. What you have said is from the heart of your experience. It inspires me to become God-oriented in my own life. It is an invitation to lead a life that is based on God-consciousness.

As a Christian, something else strikes me very much. The Bible says, in the Gospel of Matthew (6:17-18):

But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Dear friends, many years ago, I was a student at the Department of Islamic Studies at the Aligarh Muslim University. There was a professor in the Department who was a wonderful teacher and a very pious person. During the month of Ramzan, I would notice that he

would be extra careful to look fresh, with oiled and neatly-combed hair and well-ironed clothes. In the other months, he would sit and teach, while in the month of Ramzan he would teach standing. He would not show any signs of tiredness on account of fasting. He would be fully ready to spend enough time especially with me to explain things. And he would never make any reference to his tiredness or about the time the fast would end. On some occasions I would say to him, ‘You must be tired, Sir’, but he would reply, ‘Victor, it is important that I should explain things to you.’

How beautiful is the message of the Gospel (referred to above) in a way it comes to me through the life of a Muslim! I was able to see the meaning and depth of those Bible verses through my Muslim professor. This was something really amazing, a beautiful experience for me.

While I was a teacher at St. Joseph’s School in Baramulla, there would be young Muslim boys telling me, ‘Father, this year I am going to start fasting!’. They would say this with great joy. We think fasting must be something very tiring, very difficult. But never in my experience did I find my Muslim friends say that fasting in the month of Ramzan is difficult. They have always looked forward to the month with joy. This joy is on account of fasting being ordained by God in the Quran.

At the same time, I also want to share with you some anxiety that I have experienced on occasion. A few friends have a slightly narrow way of seeing religion. For instance, in some Muslim-majority countries, there may be some unreasonable restrictions on people of other faiths during the month of Ramzan. And so on. But I feel such things have nothing to do with Islam, for the Quran (2:256) says, ‘There shall be no compulsion in religion’. In line with this, one could say that pressurising others is not in the spirit of Islam.

Dear sisters and brothers, I pray with you as a Christian brother that this month of Ramzan be a blessing for all of us who desire to grow

in God-consciousness, all of us who thirst for God in our lives. May all of us put our heart and soul, hands and feet, together and worship the One God according to our faith traditions. And together as brothers and sisters may we all spread peace, joy and harmony.

Amen! Amen!

May God bless us all.

Khuda Hafiz,

Your brother,

Joseph Victor Edwin SJ

Secretary, Islamic Studies Association

I see clearly that the thing the church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity.

Pope Francis

UNITED WITH JESUS CHRIST IN SILENCE: SPIRITUALITY OF LITTLE BROTHERS OF JESUS

Cyril Antony SJ

In 1996, when I was serving as the Director of Vaigarai Publishing House in Dindigul, in Tamil Nadu, a request came from the Alampondi community of the Little Brothers of Jesus to bring out a book on the life of Br. Charles de Foucauld (d.1916) in Tamil to commemorate his 80th death anniversary. We joyfully accepted their request and published it.

Although this book was primarily about the life of Br. Charles, we included the life-experiences of some of the Little Brothers. To know their way of life, I visited and interviewed them in person at Alampondi, Thiruvananthapuram district, Tamil Nadu. It was a unique and highly memorable experience for me. The life and mission of the Brothers I met there inspired me deeply. I began sharing about the life and mission of Br. Charles and his charism and also about the Little Brothers of Alampondi while giving talks and retreats.

In May 2020, as I was sharing about the life of the Little Brothers and the charism of Br. Charles with Fr. Victor Edwin SJ over the phone, he requested me to write about my experiences with the Little Brothers at Alampondi for the *Salam* magazine—for its special issue on Charles de Foucauld. This was a great opportunity to share my experiences and perceptions about the followers of Br. Charles.

One remarkable aspect of the Little Brothers at Alampondi village was their simple way of life, from which their mission sprouted. Their very way of life was their message, not only for the people from different religious and caste backgrounds of the village but also for people living in the vicinity of the village.

Three pioneer missionary brothers Br. Shanti, from Belgium, Br. Arul and Br. Michael from France landed in Alampondi in 1964, and this was the beginning of the community of Little Brothers there. Local people donated a housing plot, and the Brothers built

a house with the help of the people. It was a small house, like any other house in that village.

The Brothers' way of life reflected the lifestyle of Jesus of Nazareth – an unassuming lifestyle. Living a Nazarene Community life means to live as one among the people. Through their work, the Brothers were deeply rooted in the lives of the people. The kind of work they chose in order to get inserted in the lives of people involved working in homes for the aged, for mentally and physically challenged children, schools for dropout children, HIV-AIDS centres, etc.

Charles felt that his call was to go to the “lost sheep”, to the most abandoned, the most needy, so as to fulfill the commandment of love towards them, to live with the lost and the last. The core spirituality of Charles is to live the life of Nazareth. What does “Nazareth” mean? “Nazareth” means: God is always with you in your life! At Nazareth the mystery of God is revealed. Brother Charles was always very captivated by the mystery of Nazareth and by the hidden life that Jesus lived there during the first thirty years of his life.

“Nazareth” is not a dogma but a living model that is possible for each person. To explain what “Nazareth” means, one can reply: “A simple, unassuming life in the midst of the world among simple people”.

“Nazareth” means living relationships in a brotherly and sisterly way in a spirit of service and simplicity, accepting one's own limitations as well as those of others. It is to meet people without prejudice, to value one another, and to give a positive self-image to all. It is a choice of a simple and shared lifestyle. Friendship reveals God in our own lives and helps us to become more and more universal brothers and sisters. “Nazareth” is to live events of ordinary life with extraordinary love for others.

“Like Jesus, you will eat with your brothers and sisters and you will rejoice with them. You will accept their hospitality with simplicity, living your Christian and religious life among them in a sisterly and brotherly way, so as to show them its beauty and greatness”, said one of the brothers. He added: “Our vocation in the Church is to be

a reminder of the mystery of Bethlehem and the hidden life of Jesus in Nazareth”.

In line with the way of life they choose to lead, the Little Brothers should not employ any workers in their house. And, they themselves must be employed outside. Br. Shanti was employed in a nearby private leprosy hospital; Br. Arul did farm work as a daily laborer; Br. Michael prepared naturopathy medicines, particularly for diabetes, which he would give to people in and around Alampondi. Using their meager income, they maintained their life. They did all kinds of housework, such as cooking, cleaning, purchasing, etc., by themselves.

The dynamic presence of the positive example of a person can help make other people's life and mission meaningful and fruitful. Br. Charles is still remembered by many people and inspires them because of his dynamic, committed and humble way of life. He sincerely searched and lived the life of consecrated life—witnessing to God and the world.

Being intimately united with Jesus Christ in silence, to be with the people, especially the marginalized, having a simple and hidden way of life, and respecting people of other faiths were some fundamental principles that Charles left behind, which we can greatly benefit from.

Blessed Charles was the inspiration for the founding of several lay associations, religious communities and secular institutes of laity and priests, known collectively as “the spiritual family of Charles de Foucauld.”

Hospitality is an important human value that Little Brothers try to put into practice. They are happy in sharing what they have. I experienced this at Alampondi. In Bangalore, where the Brothers have a community, people love to visit the Brothers' house because they show love and compassion. Their joyful living has helped built a good rapport with people from different faith backgrounds.

Community life is an important area where the Brothers show their love for one another. There is a family spirit among them. Since their congregation does not run institutions, they do not fight for

the power and position. Rather, they serve others, including one another. I could see joy and happiness in the faces of the Brothers when I met them at Alampondi.

Building friendship with people is yet another strong value that the Brothers follow in their life. At Alampondi, the Brothers enjoyed a strong loving relationship with the local people. Their relationship with the people gave them a sense of belonging. Charles discovered that Jesus invites us to that universal brotherhood.

In principle, the Brothers do not get ordained, although they undergo formal theological studies. However, for their spiritual needs, they select one or two brothers to get ordained. They help the nearby parishes, but their focus is to be with the people, including people of other faiths.

At present, the Brothers live in 38 countries, and they number 270 in all. In India, they have two communities, in Bangalore and in Thiruvannamalai, with a total of six brothers.

The life of Br. Charles and his followers challenges the present-day Christian religious life and mission. More institutions, lack of brotherly love, care and concern, distancing with the life-situations of the people, aspiring for more power and position, etc. make many religious in different Christian congregations alienated from the spirit and vision of their founders.

The Brothers' life is very hard. Some young people come and live with them for a few weeks and then most of them leave. Hardly a few remain. This is the universal experience of the Brothers all over the world. But the Brothers unanimously feel that they want to continue their rigorous way of life. Even though the number is just six in India and 270 globally, they are not disappointed. Rather, they are hopeful.

Anyone can join the congregation of the Brothers, even those who have minimum educational qualifications. Educational qualification is not the main criteria to decide anyone's vocation. Rather, it is the spirit; enthusiasm, commitment and a sense of mission that make one's vocation truthful and meaningful.

For the Brothers, formation is not given within the four walls of a classroom, with a pre-determined number of formal classes. Rather, their formation happens while sharing in the lives of the people and in the course of leading a simple way of life. Unlike other congregations, they do not have formation houses. Rather, among the Brothers there is one who is in charge of the young Brothers.

The Brothers depend on God's providence. All the Brothers I met at Alampondi told me that they experience the loving providence of God at all times. Br. Charles insisted that the Brothers should live with the poor and that their residence must be like poor people's homes. They should accept the life of the poor and live like them.

In India, few Christian youth showed interest in joining the congregation of Little Brothers, and also the Little Sisters. Was it because of the tough way of life of the Brothers, and the Sisters? Or because they do not have even a single educational institution, where some people can find security and comfort?

The lifestyle of Charles is tough, but of more witnessing value. Br. Charles adopted a new apostolic approach, preaching not through sermons, but through his personal example. Charles wanted to "shout the Gospel with his life" and to conduct his life in such a way that people would ask, "If such is the servant, what must the Master be like?"

The spirituality of universal love and brotherhood of Charles gives hope to a new world. A new way of life is possible when people are loved. Love is the greatest power in the world. It can change everything.

Above all, we must always see Jesus in every person, and, consequently, treat each person as an equal and as a brother or sister, and with great humility, respect and selfless generosity.

“...GOD GAVE THE GROWTH:” A LEGACY OF CHARLES DE FOUCAULD

Bonnie Bowman Thurston

Pope Francis’ encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, closes with reference to Blessed Charles de Foucauld whose mission in the Moroccan deserts apparently had such meager effect in his lifetime. Yet Br. Charles endures as a sterling example not just of inter-religious dialogue, but of familial respect for those different from one’s self and culture. “Only by identifying with the least,” Pope Francis writes, “did he come at last to be the brother of all.”¹

Foucauld reminds us of two fascinating things about the formation and recognition of saints. First, their early lives often are quite un-saintly (as Foucauld’s biography attests). Second, the processes of holiness seem to operate by no recognizably human time table. (The cause for Foucauld’s beatification began in 1927!) Like our Lord’s, a saint’s life may end in apparent failure, but, like the mustard seed in His parable, a great tree may spring from it. As St. Paul explained, one plants, another waters, “but only God ... gives the growth.” (1 Corinthians 3: 6-7) God grew Br. Charles’ good seed. Two of its vigorous “plants” are religious communities springing from Foucauld’s charism and a critically important “vine” of Muslim-Christian dialogue.

Many have and will shelter under the tree of congregations founded through Foucauld’s influence, notably Little Brothers of Jesus founded in the Sahara in 1933 by Rene Voillaume and four companions as *Petits Freres du Sacre-Coeur*,² and Little Sisters of Jesus, *Petites Soeurs de Jesus*, founded in Algeria in 1936 by Sr. Magdeleine.³ Spiritual children of Foucauld continue to flourish in

¹ Quoted in Christopher Lamb, “A better way is possible,” *The Tablet* Oct. 10, 2020 (274/9372) 5.

² See Rene Voillaume, *Brothers of Men: Letters to the Petits Freres* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd) 1966.

³ See Kathryn Spink, *The Call of the Desert: A Biography of Little Sister Magdeleine of Jesus* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1993). At her death in 1991 there were 1,400 Little Sisters from 60 nationalities.

these Orders, among those they serve and in international religious and lay fraternities.⁴

Also directly from seed Br. Charles planted in the sandy soil of Muslim Morocco, an important Muslim-Christian dialogue flowered in the twentieth century. Foucauld was a formative influence on French academic and spiritual master, Louis Massignon, who influenced Thomas Merton, OCSO, arguably America's most famous monastic spiritual writer and an important voice in inter-religious dialogue (especially with Buddhism and Islam). Merton's correspondence with the Pakistani Muslim Abdul Aziz is one of the most complete Muslim-Christian dialogues from the mid-twentieth century. An outline of the "family tree" of dialogue which grew directly from Foucauld's "root" follows.⁵

Foucauld and Louis Massignon

Born in Paris in 1883, Massignon became one of France's most important and influential Islamic scholars and the world's great orientalist. Raised Roman Catholic by his mother, like Foucauld, Massignon travelled to North Africa (1903) to work on his thesis. After mastering Arabic, Massignon studied in Cairo (1906) where he encountered the writings of Muslim mystic al-Hallaj (858-922) who became the subject of his doctoral dissertation. That work, *La Passion d'al Husayn ibn Mansour al-Hallaj* (Paris: Geuthner, 1922, 2 vols.) largely initiated study of Sufism and Islamic mysticism in the West.⁶

⁴ For more see Appendices of Jean-Jacques Antier, *Charles de Foucauld (Charles of Jesus)* Julia Shirek Smith, transl., (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999) 329-334.

⁵ This section relies on essays by eminent scholar at the Catholic University of America, Sidney H. Griffith, S.T. "Merton, Massignon, and the Challenge of Islam" and " 'As One Spiritual Man to Another': The Merton-Abdul Aziz Correspondence" in Rob Baker and Gray Henry (eds) *Merton and Sufism: The Untold Story* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999). My professional and personal debts to him are considerable.

⁶ Massignon's work has been translated from the French by Herbert Mason and is available in the Bollingen Series of Princeton University Press. And see the entry on al-Hallaj in *Early Islamic Mysticism* (Michael A. Sells, transl. & ed.) (New York: Paulist Press, 1996).

Massignon's subsequent development and spiritual biography are fascinating. It is tempting to describe his marriage (1914), priesthood in the Melkite Rite (1950), and the development of a sodality, *al-Badaliyyah*⁷ (root *badal*), derived from al-Hallaj and based on the practice of mystical substitution, taking on another's suffering, the "substitution of one person and his merits and prayers for the salvation of someone else."⁸ Widely published on many topics⁹, Massignon was an active participant in France's Catholic renaissance (which included J.K. Huysmans, Teilhard de Chardin, Gabriel Marcel, Georges Bernanos, Francois Mauriac, and Jacques Maritain). Professor Griffith describes him as "that rarity in the modern world, a truly saintly scholar."¹⁰ He was profoundly influenced by the ideas of Charles de Foucauld and promoted them.

In October, 1906 Massignon wrote to Foucauld (who had published *Reconnaissance au Maroc* to great acclaim in 1888-89), sending his thesis on Morocco. As a youth, Massignon lost his faith (as had Foucauld). Foucauld promised to pray for him. Later, working near Baghdad, Massignon was kidnapped by fanatics and subsequently experienced "an ecstasy of fire and light, the certainty of the existence of God and Love."¹¹ (Foucauld's prayers answered?) The two met when Foucauld was in France in 1909. Br. Charles hoped Massignon would be "his spiritual heir...the longed-for companion who would assist him at Tamanrasset."¹² Family pressure and his spiritual director discouraged Massignon from going, though he and Br. Charles continued to correspond.

⁷ Pope Paul VI belonged to the sodality. The movement based in Cairo under the name *Dar as-Salam* (House of Peace) published several periodicals, copies of which Massignon arranged to have sent to Merton.

⁸ Griffith, "Merton, Massignon, and the Challenge of Islam," 55.

⁹ See Jean-Jacques Waardenburb, "L. Massignon's Study of Religion and Islam: An Essay a propose of his *Opera Minora*," *Oriens* 21-22 (1968-69) 135-158 and Youakim Moubarac, *L'Oeuvre de Louis Massignon; Pentalogie Islamo-Chretienne I* (Beyrouth, Editions du Cenacle Libanais, 1972-1973).

¹⁰ Griffith, "Merton, Massignon, and the Challenge of Islam," 57.

¹¹ Quoted in Antier 270. I rely on his biography of Foucauld for information on his relationship with Massignon.

¹² Antier 270-271.

Foucauld returned to France in 1911 and again encouraged Massignon to join him in North Africa. The younger man was disposed to do so, on a trial basis, but again, the family intervened. His father insisted that he apply for a professorship at Lyon. Foucauld continued to await for him, but in spite of encouragement from Paul Claudel, Massignon remained in France and eventually went to Cairo to lecture in the new Muslim university.¹³ The two met once more in 1913. Massignon had decided to marry. Foucauld graciously wrote to him, "How great and beautiful, the mission of husband and wife!"¹⁴

While he never joined Foucauld in Morocco, Massignon was deeply influenced by Foucauld's spirituality and attitude toward Muslims. He wrote in 1917 of Foucauld's "contact with this dominant faith, which burns the believer to ashes beneath the unreachable sun of divine unity" which "acted as a catalyst to bring his unbelief back to Christian doctrine...".¹⁵ Spiritual relations between Christians and Muslims was Massignon's life work, highlighting their shared beliefs and practices.¹⁶ In 1924-28 "he played a major role in promoting interest in the ideals of Charles de Foucauld, including the publication of the latter's rule for religious life, *The Directory*."¹⁷ Massignon's scholarship on Islam was enormously influential, the tap root of his opposition to France's Algerian War. He died in 1962, but not before corresponding with Thomas Merton who was already familiar with Foucauld.

Massignon and Thomas Merton

Herbert Mason, an American doing research in Paris, introduced Merton to Massignon. In May, 1959 Mason wrote to Merton about his book *The Ascent to Truth* (1951) on St. John of the Cross. In August, 1959 Mason wrote to Merton about Massignon, enclosing his work on the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus. Merton sent

¹³ For a more complete account see Antier 269-296.

¹⁴ Quoted in Antier 295.

¹⁵ Quoted in Antier 93 and 118.

¹⁶ An example was his interest in the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, mentioned in Sura 18 of the Holy Qur'an.

¹⁷ Griffith, "Merton, Massignon, and the Challenge of Islam," 55.

his article on Boris Pasternak which Mason apparently shared with Massignon. By September, 1959 Massignon is writing to Merton. The Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University (Louisville, Kentucky) has fourteen letters in English from Massignon between September 3, 1959 and April 26, 1961. Some of Merton's letters to Massignon appear in *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*.¹⁸

Two factors facilitated the epistolary friendship. First, Thomas Merton was born in France, lived there as a child. (See Part I, Chapter 2, "Our Lady of the Museums," in his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 1948). He describes France as "... the fountains of the intellectual and spiritual life of the world to which I belonged."¹⁹ Born and educated in France (and British secondary schools) and fluent in French, Merton was arguably a European, and knew Massignon's country and culture.

Second, Merton admired Charles de Foucauld.²⁰ Between 1947 and 1964 I counted some twenty references to Foucauld in Merton's letters and journals. Merton's March 9, 1950 journal entry indicates he is reading the spiritual notes of Foucauld who "speaks to God in a clear and vibrant voice, simple words, sentences on fire. This voice rings in the ear of your heart after you have put the book away..."²¹ A March 18, 1960 letter to Massignon mentions both Al-Hallaj and his "leaflet on Charles de Foucauld."²² Merton's August 20, 1960 journal entry notes, "The voice and message of Charles de Foucauld mean very much to me. I think it is the most hopeful and living kind of message in our time."²³ On May 20, 1964 he

¹⁸ Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis* (William H. Shannon, ed.) (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994) 275-281.

¹⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday/Image Books, 1970) 43.

²⁰ See Bonnie Thurston, "'...the most hopeful and living kind of message...': An Introduction to Charles de Foucauld and Thomas Merton," *The Merton Seasonal*, Summer, 2017 (Vol. 42, No. 2) 3-10.

²¹ Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence* (Journals, Vol. 2 1941-1952) (Jonathan Montaldo, ed.) (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996) 417.

²² Merton, *Witness to Freedom*, 276.

²³ Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World* (Journals, Vol. 4, 1960-63)

wrote to James Forest (an American activist, writer and a founder of Catholic Peace Fellowship), "...I am reading some fantastic stuff on Islam by Louis Massignon..."²⁴

Merton's *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation*, a book with a complex history but first drafted in 1959, closes with an extended reflection on the Little Brothers of Jesus, founded by Voillaume who was influenced by Foucauld. Merton concurs with their experiment in living contemplatively "like the lay people around them...dedicated to God..." and seeking "to imitate the hidden life of Jesus Christ at Nazareth..."²⁵ a clear reference to Foucauld. Of them Merton says, "...where they are present, Christ is present."²⁶ These pages on Foucauld echo Merton's understanding of contemplation as he was exploring alternative monastic possibilities. What he hoped for himself echoed Foucauld's aspirations: to be a hermit/monk living a hidden life as a universal brother.

Professor Griffith summarizes the Massignon-Merton correspondence: both men were "searching for holiness" which includes addressing "the evils of their own societies."²⁷ Merton supported Massignon's work on behalf of North Africans in Paris and his opposition to the Algerian war. Massignon introduced Merton to the "mystical substitution" (mentioned above), and, most importantly, the Islamic concept of *le point vierge* in al-Hallaj. The Islamic understanding of the primordial or virgin point within humans appears repeatedly in Merton's writing in the 1960's. Merton writes to Massignon on July 20, 1960 it "...moves me most of all."²⁸

(Victor A Kramer, ed.) (San Francisco:HarperSanFrancisco, 1997) 33.

²⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters* (William H. Shannon, ed.) (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 280.

²⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation* (William F. Shannon, ed.) (London: SPCK, 2003) 142.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Griffith, "Merton, Massignon and the Challenge of Islam" 59.

²⁸ Merton, *Witness to Freedom*, 278.

Because he did not write a book on Islam, Merton's engagement with it is not widely known. He knew the tradition well and wrote in an October 31, 1967 letter of reading the Holy Qur'an, Avicenna, Ibn-Arabi, Ibn-Abbad, and Rumi.²⁹ Merton read the best available works on Islam in English and French. Although the talks are disappointing,³⁰ he lectured on Sufism to the monks at Gethsemani, and was especially interested in *jihad* (a spiritual term describing the struggle to conform one's will to God's), and the practices of *dhikr* (repetition of the Name) and *khalwah* (solitary retreat). He corresponded widely with Muslims and Islamic scholars.³¹ There are seven poems on Islamic subjects in Merton's *Collected Poems*³² and many references in his essays, letters and journals.

In his journal on November 17, 1964 Merton wrote of Foucauld and Massignon, "both converted to Christianity by the witness of Islam to the one living God."³³ Foucauld influenced Massignon. Massignon influenced Merton. William Shannon notes "it is clear that Massignon had a deep influence on Merton, who

²⁹ Merton, *Witness to Freedom* 335.

³⁰ Abdul Aziz wrote to William Shannon May 10, 1986 that he was "shocked and disappointed about Merton's burlesque/parody of Sufism...". In Griffith "As One Spiritual Man to Another," *Merton and Sufism* 121. See Bernadette Dieker, "Merton's Sufi Lectures to Cistercian Novices, 1966-68," in *Merton and Sufism* 130-162. Recordings of some of the lectures are on "Thomas Merton on Sufism" available at www.NowYouKnowMedia.com 2012. I cannot recommend them.

³¹ Reza Arasteh, Martin Lings, Louis Massignon, Herbert Mason, Abdul Aziz, Aly Abdel Ghani.

³² For more see Patrick F. O'Connell, "Crescent Moon on the Eastern Horizon: Thomas Merton's Shorter Poems on Islamic themes," *The American Benedictine Review* Sept. 2015 (Vol. 66, no. 3) 230-267; Erlinda Paguio, "Islamic Themes in Merton's Poetry," *Merton and Sufism* 89-100, and Bonnie Thurston, "Some Reflections on Merton's Islamic Poems" in Angus Stuart (ed.), *Thomas Merton: The World in my Bloodstream* (Abergavenny, Wales: Three Peaks Press, 2004) 39-53.

³³ Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life* (Journals, Vol. 5, 1963-1965) (Robert E. Daggy, ed.) (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997) 166.

looked upon him as a spiritual mentor.”³⁴ Massignon’s letters to Merton encouraged the monk’s Islamic interests. With al-Hallaj’s idea of *le pointe vierge*, Massignon’s most important gift to Merton was introducing him to Abdul Aziz. In correspondence with Aziz one encounters the depth of Merton’s understanding of Islam and reads of his own prayer practice.

Merton and Abdul Aziz³⁵

In December, 1951 Muslim Abdul Aziz asked a Roman Catholic colleague in Karachi to recommend a book on Christian mysticism. He suggested Thomas Merton’s *The Ascent to Truth* (1951) which attempted to explain the mystical theology of St. John of the Cross in light of St. Thomas Aquinas. By Merton’s own admission it was not a great success, but led Herbert Mason to write to Merton, which led to the Merton-Massignon correspondence. Aziz received the book in February, 1952, and soon thereafter began corresponding with Massignon. When Aziz mentioned Merton’s book, Massignon suggested writing to Merton who was also interested in al-Hallaj, which Aziz did on November 1, 1960. Merton responded on November 17, 1960. The correspondence continued until Merton’s death in 1968. Seventeen of Merton’s letters are preserved at Bellarmine University; fifteen appear (edited) in *The Hidden Ground of Love*.³⁶ The sixteen letters of Aziz at Bellarmine remain unpublished. Professor Griffiths believes the “letters are unique”³⁷ in Islamic-Christian dialogue.

³⁴ William H. Shannon, “Massignon, Louis,” in *The Merton Encyclopedia* (Shannon, Bochen, O’Connell, eds.) (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002) 287.

³⁵ The definitive essay is Sidney H. Griffith’s “‘As One Spiritual Man to Another’ the Merton-Abdul Aziz Correspondence,” in *Merton & Sufism: the Untold Story* 101-129. See also Bonnie Bowman Thurston, “Brothers in Prayer and Worship: The Merton/Aziz Correspondence, An Islamic-Christian Dialogue,” 17-33 in *The Voice of the Stranger* Essays delivered at the 7th general meeting of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 6-8 April 2008. www.thomasmertonsociety.org

³⁶ Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love* 43-67.

³⁷ Sidney H. Griffith, “Mystics and Sufi Masters: Thomas Merton and the Dialogue between Christians and Muslims,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* July, 2004 (Vol. 15, No. 3) 303.

As with Massignon, biographical factors facilitated the friendship. Aziz was highly educated in the British system and lived through the turbulent years of the British withdrawal from India and the violent division of India and Pakistan. A devout Muslim, Aziz was a practicing Sufi. The two men were almost exact contemporaries, formed by British education and institutions. Both were devout practitioners of their own religious traditions. Their deepest meeting points were Islamic and Christian prayer and mysticism in which both were well read and experientially knowledgeable. Each had read spiritual classics of the other's tradition and served as a reference service for the other, exchanging articles and books.

Aziz's letters initially exhibit the formality of English diplomacy. Merton writes less formal, less systematic responses. As the friendship develops, Aziz exhibits touching concern for Merton's health (giving advice about diet and rest). Merton wrote to other Muslims and Islamic scholars, but the Aziz letters are unique in their personal self-revelation. Affectionate openings and prayerful closings of the letters, often reflecting Islamic concepts, indicate how deeply the two understood *Tawhid* ("making one"). Merton's letters to Aziz reflect wide knowledge and deep understanding of Islam. The letter of January 2, 1966 details his daily life in his hermitage and his own method of meditation. To my knowledge it is the only autobiographical record we have of Merton's personal prayer practice.³⁸

More could be said about the Aziz-Merton exchange. (See notes.) Lest we lose the thread of this essay, I introduce two reminders. First, clearly Merton's Christianity was enhanced by his engagement with Islam, just as Foucauld's and Massignon's had been, theirs by direct contact, Merton's secondarily through

³⁸ For more see Bonnie Thurston, "'Rising Up Out of the Center:' Thomas Merton on Prayer," *The Merton Annual* 20 (2007) 109-122 and chapter 7 in *Shaped by the End You Live For: Thomas Merton's Monastic Spirituality* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2020).

his association with them, and directly through his friendship with Abdul Aziz. What Prof. Christine Bochen wrote of Merton, is true of all four men: They had a “vocation to unity.”³⁹ Although learned, their encounters were personal, spiritual, and transformative.

Second, the “hereditary line” from Foucauld to Merton is direct. Foucauld influenced Massignon who influenced Merton. Foucauld’s profound encounter with and debt to Islam was mirrored in Massignon’s experience. Both influenced Merton, Foucauld through Merton’s reading, and Massignon in their correspondence which provided Merton with ideas that facilitated his dialogue with Abdul Aziz.

Conclusion

Outside human, linear time, God’s work cannot be evaluated by its constraints. Merton wrote to James Forest, “do not depend on the hope of results. When you are doing the sort of work you have taken on, essentially... apostolic work, you may have to face the fact that your work will be *apparently* worthless and even achieve no result at all...”⁴⁰ (*Italics mine.*) In 1916, Foucauld’s life’s work *appeared* fruitless. But history demonstrates the church grows from the blood of her martyrs. Watered by his blood, the seed Foucauld planted in desert sand produced extraordinary fruit and ongoing possibilities for his essential work: bringing Christ to North Africa by living like Him among his Muslim neighbors.

St. Paul knew and as every gardener and farmer learns, gardening takes time and patience. One plants; another waters, “but only God...gives the growth” (1 Corinthians 3:6-7) --- in God’s “time.” It takes time for the grape vine to mature, even longer for the wine produced from it. The influence of Foucauld on Massignon, who encouraged Merton, who engaged in dialogue with Abdul Aziz and developed an important set of principles for inter-religious dialogue,⁴¹ extends over more than a century and continues.

³⁹ Christine Bochen (ed.), *Thomas Merton: Essential Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 2000) 48.

⁴⁰ Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love* 294.

⁴¹ See Appendix 4 and 5 in *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (N. Burton, P. Hart & J. Laughlin, eds.) (New York: New Directions, 1968/ 1975).

What Merton wrote to Abdul Aziz in 1962, was true in Foucauld's day and is in ours, Muslim-Christian understanding "is something of very vital importance... and unfortunately it is rare and uncertain, or else subjected to the vagaries of politics."⁴² But those who confess the One God (*Tawhid*) can, for love of God, continue to water Foucauld's "vine," be nourished by his example, and, as he wrote, break "... down... prejudices... through daily friendly relations, and changing ... ideas by the manner and example of our lives."⁴³ Following Foucauld's example, living the "hidden life of Jesus," "the obscurity of a life hidden in God" and "where it will be of most service to [our] neighbor," we best care for his vine.⁴⁴ Foucauld recorded this word of Jesus during his retreat at Nazareth in November, 1897, "it is part of your vocation to proclaim the Gospel from the rooftops, not by what you say, but by how you live."⁴⁵

⁴² Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love* 53.

⁴³ Jean-Francois Six (ed.), *The Spiritual Autobiography of Charles de Foucauld* (J. Holland Smith, transl.) (Ijamsville, MD: The Word Among Us Press, 2003) 181.

⁴⁴ Foucauld, quoted in Six 83 & 167.

⁴⁵ Robert Ellsberg (ed.), *Charles de Foucauld* (Modern Spiritual Masters Series) (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999) 79.

“CHARLES DE FOUCAULD, LOUIS MASSIGNON, CATHOLIC SPIRITUALITY, AND ISLAM”

Christian S. Krokus

At the conclusion of his book on the friendship between Charles de Foucauld (1858-1916) and Louis Massignon (1883-1962), Jean-François Six asks: “According to a reading of his letters to Massignon, what are the essential axes of Foucauldian spirituality? First of all, God is happy. He is never presented by Foucauld as a somber and terrible being, but as a being who possesses the fullness of joy.”⁴⁶ Throughout his letters Foucauld most frequently refers to God as the Divine Lover, the Divine Spouse, or simply the Beloved. In one letter he writes: “Religion is all love. ‘The Good Will of God toward men.’ The first obligation is to love God; the second is to love one’s neighbor as oneself for God.”⁴⁷ Indeed it is remarkable how often Foucauld returns in those letters to the simplicity of love of God and love of neighbor, often adding the seemingly redundant specification: “How to acquire the love of God? By practicing charity toward men.”⁴⁸ Foucauld thought of himself as Massignon’s “older brother,” and while the themes just mentioned are undoubtedly characteristic of Foucauld’s spirituality in general, they also happen to be what his younger brother needed to hear.⁴⁹

Both Foucauld and Massignon were converts to their native Catholic faith, but their conversion experiences were dramatically different. As Six observes: “The conversion of Charles de Foucauld occurred in an extremely simple way, one morning at the end of October 1886, through a peaceful confession at the gentle invitation of an admirable priest, followed by communion, all in an ordinary church. The conversion of Louis Massignon in

⁴⁶ Six, Jean-François. *L’Aventure de l’amour de dieu: 80 lettres inédites de Charles de Foucauld à Louis Massignon*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1993: 236. Unless otherwise indicated, translations from French are my own.

⁴⁷ January 31, 1912 in Six, *L’Aventure*: 120.

⁴⁸ August 31, 1910 in Six, *L’Aventure*: 83. Foucauld was influenced by St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622) through the spiritual writer Abbé Antoine Crozier (1850-1916). See, for example, Six, *L’Aventure*: 93.

⁴⁹ April 7, 1912 (Easter Sunday) in Six, *L’Aventure*: 126.

1908 is of a different kind.”⁵⁰ There was nothing ordinary, peaceful, or gentle about Massignon’s conversion experience. As a young man Massignon was involved in several homosexual encounters, including an ongoing relationship with the Spanish convert to Islam Luis de Cuadra (d. 1921). And whereas he once prided himself on transgressing social convention, in the turbulent days leading up to and through his May 1908 conversion he developed a keen sense of “good and evil.”⁵¹ Despairing of having committed acts of evil, he attempted to take his own life, and it was then that he experienced his well-known “Visitation of the Stranger,” a conversion characterized in large part by a sense of being judged, deserving damnation, and being rescued from that fate only by the intercession of living and deceased witnesses, among them Charles de Foucauld, as Massignon understood it.⁵²

In the aftermath of his conversion Massignon continued to be plagued by guilt and a near-compulsive urge to confess and to perform acts of penance partly because he remained haunted by “temptations,” presumably toward other men.⁵³ Such “temptations” feature prominently in the correspondence between Massignon and Foucauld, and here is where Foucauld applies his own understanding of God as a healing balm to Massignon’s tortured soul. Time and again Foucauld writes a version of the following excerpt from his letter of July 15, 1916: “Let us review often the double history of the graces that God has granted to us personally since our birth and of our infidelities.”⁵⁴ In other words, yes, acknowledge the missteps for which you are responsible, but do so always and only in the light of God’s tender and understanding care, uninterruptedly present

⁵⁰ Six, *L’Aventure*: 39.

⁵¹ Destremau, Christian and Moncelon, Jean. *Louis Massignon: le “cheikh admirable.”* Lectoure, France: Éditions Le Capucin, 2005: 85-86.

⁵² Massignon, Louis. “Visitation of the Stranger: Response to an Inquiry about God,” *Testimonies and Reflections: Essays of Louis Massignon*. Herbert Mason, tr. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989: 39-42.

⁵³ I do not, however, know with certainty exactly what Massignon and Foucauld discussed under the category of “temptations,” a category along with many others in their correspondence that are likely drawn from the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556).

⁵⁴ In Six, *L’Aventure*: 205.

throughout your life. Foucauld often instructs Massignon, as in his letter of October 30, 1909: “Do not be surprised by temptations, dryness, or miseries,” for “He puts our poor hearts through this ordeal in order to give us the opportunity to prove our love to him, to strengthen it, to grow in virtue, and to become more worthy of him.”⁵⁵

Without denying their presence or severity, Foucauld never enters into the details of the temptations Massignon experienced. Instead he turns Massignon’s attention away from himself and toward his neighbor: “Let us seek to redeem our sins a bit through love of neighbor. Doing good for others is an excellent remedy to temptations. It is to pass from defense to counter-attack.”⁵⁶ There will be falls, but it is important to remember that “if one succumbs to a temptation, it is not that one does not love at all but that one’s love is too weak, in which case one must cry like St. Peter and be humbled like him. However, also like him, one must say three times: ‘I love you. I love you. You know that despite my weaknesses and sins, I love you.’”⁵⁷

Nowhere is Foucauld’s compassionate counsel more evident than in his response to Massignon’s decision to marry rather than to join him at Tamanrasset. Massignon was Foucauld’s best hope for finding a companion and a successor. The news must have been terribly disappointing to him, but there is not a hint of it in his subsequent letters.⁵⁸ Knowing Massignon’s struggles with sexuality as well as his penchant for dwelling on past sins, and perhaps knowing Massignon’s confessed “misogyny,”⁵⁹ Foucauld counseled his younger confrere: “If God wants marriage for you, do not accept it as an expiation but as the state in which he has reserved the most graces for you.... [W]hat a grand and admirable vocation! And how good to be a married saint in the world, penetrating into spaces where the priest hardly enters and penetrating with an intimacy

⁵⁵ In Six, *L’Aventure*: 67.

⁵⁶ July 15, 1916 in Six, *L’Aventure*: 206.

⁵⁷ July 15, 1916 in Six, *L’Aventure*: 205.

⁵⁸ The contrast with the disparaging, dismissive, and sarcastic response of Paul Claudel to the same news is particularly striking. See Six, *L’Aventure*: 151, 162, 183.

⁵⁹ Destremau, *Louis Massignon*: 124.

rarely possible for a priest.”⁶⁰ A major thread in Foucauld’s letters therefore is that of an experienced Christian counseling a recent convert toward trust in a loving God, gentleness with himself, and compassionate kindness toward others.

There is, however, another thread, which became prominent in the later letters where Foucauld sometimes glorifies danger, violence, and even death. When World War I began Massignon, recently married and with a child on the way, hesitated to join the effort but was persuaded by friends to take a position in Paris with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.⁶¹ When he requested active duty at the Dardanelles Foucauld commended him for his courage: “I approve absolutely. Remain at the front until the end.” He continued: “With respect to the sacrifices to be made and the duties to be fulfilled, we should always be in the front row.”⁶² In what he called “a feeble attempt to show him that I had not deserted his call,” Massignon informed Foucauld of his next request for an even more dangerous assignment in the trenches on the Serbian front.⁶³ Once again Foucauld approved. In his letter of December 1, 1916, just hours before he was killed, Foucauld wrote: “You did very well to ask to join the troop. We should never hesitate to request the posts where the danger, the sacrifice, and the dedication are the greatest. Let us leave the honor to whoever wants it, but the danger and the pain, let us always claim them. Christians must provide the example of sacrifice and dedication. It is a principle to which we must be faithful for all our lives, simply, without asking ourselves

⁶⁰ September 30, 1913 in Six, *L’Aventure*: 154. Christian Destremau speculates that Massignon was influenced by Anne-Catherine Emmerich who said: “Marriage is a state of penance,” Destremau, *Louis Massignon*: 133.

⁶¹ See Destremau, *Louis Massignon*: 139-40.

⁶² June 1, 1916 in Six, *L’Aventure*: 204. See also the letters of June 29, 1915 (187), July 15, 1915 (188), and September 8, 1915 (189).

⁶³ Massignon, Louis. “An Entire Life with a Brother Who Set Out on the Desert: Charles de Foucauld,” *Testimonies*: 28. On Massignon’s “expiation” for not joining Foucauld at Tamanrasset, see also Dall’Oglio, Paolo. “Massignon and *ḡihād* in the light of de Foucauld, al-Ḥallāḡ and Gandhi,” *Faith, Power, and Violence: Muslims and Christians in a Plural Society, Past and Present*. John Donohue and Christian Troll, eds. Rome: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 1998: 103-14.

whether there is pride in our conduct. It is our duty.”⁶⁴ After advising Massignon not to worry about his family, promising that God would protect his wife and child should he be killed in action, he insists: “Walk this way in simplicity and peace, certain that it is JESUS who inspired you to follow it.”⁶⁵

The mix of violence and religious sentiment is thoroughgoing in those late letters. Foucauld described the war as a “crusade” and a “religious duty.”⁶⁶ He argued that the wickedness of the Germans “put them beyond the law.”⁶⁷ He encouraged Massignon to think of himself as participating in Jesus’ saving mission, “even by arms and combat, for the present war is a crusade against the paganism and barbarity of the Germans. You save future generations by defending them against the invasion of these anti-Christian doctrines.”⁶⁸ His disparagement of the Germans was matched only by his confidence in the virtue, rightness, and even holiness of the French: “We should be happy at being born French and for being on the side of law and justice, on the side that fights in order that Christian morality remains and becomes ever more the law of the world.”⁶⁹

Even outside the direct context of war, as Massignon observed, Foucauld sometimes said things “not very compatible with his priesthood.” For example, after a local raid resulted in the death of a young officer whom Foucauld respected, he demanded vengeance, hoping soldiers would catch the organizer and “put twelve bullets in his skin.”⁷⁰ He also long experienced a desire for martyrdom. In an oft-quoted passage from a meditation of 1897, Foucauld writes in the voice of Jesus: “Remember that you ought to die as a martyr, stripped of everything, stretched naked on the ground, unrecognizable, covered with wounds and blood, killed violently

⁶⁴ In Six, *L’Aventure*: 214.

⁶⁵ In Six, *L’Aventure*: 214.

⁶⁶ December 6, 1915 in Six, *L’Aventure*: 195.

⁶⁷ January 12, 1916 in Six, *L’Aventure*: 197.

⁶⁸ September 15, 1916 in Six, *L’Aventure*: 212.

⁶⁹ March 6, 1916 in Six, *L’Aventure*: 200.

⁷⁰ Massignon, Louis. “Foucauld au desert devant le dieu d’Abraham, Agar, et Ismaël,” *Écrits mémorables* vol. 1. Christian Jambet, François Angelier, François L’Yvonnet, Souâd Ayada, eds. Paris: Éditions Robert Laffont, 2009: 112.

and painfully – and desire that it be today.”⁷¹ If his description of a whole nation as “beyond the law” and as deserving of destruction contradicts his emphasis on a loving, gentle, forgiving God, then his desire for martyrdom, embrace of the cross, and encouragement of sacrifice, while not rising to the same level of contradiction, at least sit in tension with his devotion to the God who rejoices in love and family and the ordinary currents of life, the God who rejoices in Nazareth.

In various talks and publications Massignon passed along much of the tender spiritual wisdom he received in Foucauld’s letters. For example, in the Badaliya convocation of January 5, 1962, he advised: “Remember, Foucauld wrote to us to go frequently over the double history (within yourselves), of the graces received from God and of our infidelities.”⁷² In an article that would become an appendix to the 1961 edition of the *Directory*,⁷³ Massignon quoted another line that appears regularly in Foucauld’s letters: “One achieves good, not to the extent of what one says or does, but to the extent of who one is – to the extent that grace accompanies our acts, to the extent that our acts are the acts of Jesus acting in us and through us.”⁷⁴ Most importantly, inspired by Foucauld, Massignon called the Badaliya to live as the “poor amongst the most poor.”⁷⁵ He develops that last point at some length in a 1959 Sorbonne tribute to Foucauld. He writes: “I feel obligated to explain to you how, through this living experience of the sacred in others, Foucauld was

⁷¹ Foucauld, Charles de. *Charles de Foucauld: Writings*. Robert Ellsberg, ed. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999: 77. See also, for instance, Foucauld, Charles de. *Scriptural Meditations on Faith*. Alexandra Russell, tr. New York: New City Press, 1988: 129-30; Foucauld, Charles de. *Meditations of a Hermit*. Charlotte Balfour, tr. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981: 186.

⁷² Massignon, Louis. *Louis Massignon: A Pioneer of Interfaith Dialogue, The Badaliya Prayer Movement*. Dorothy Buck, ed. Clifton, NJ: Blue Dome Press, 2016: 264.

⁷³ For a summary of Massignon’s role in the spiritual legacy of Foucauld, see Keryell, Jacques. “Louis Massignon et l’Association Charles de Foucauld,” *Louis Massignon au coeur de notre temps*. Keryell, Jacques, ed. Paris: Éditions Karthala, 1999: 173-93.

⁷⁴ Massignon, Louis. “L’Union de prières pour le développement de l’esprit missionnaire surtout en faveur des colonies françaises,” *EM* 1: 102.

⁷⁵ Convocation #56 – June 5, 1959 in Massignon, *Badaliya*: 174.

given to me like an older brother and how he helped me to find my brothers in all other human beings, starting with the most abandoned ones.” He continues: “I needed him to communicate to me, through spiritual contact, in very simple words, by interviews and letters, his experiential initiation into the real understanding of the human condition, his experiential knowledge of the compassion which drew him and committed him to the most abandoned of human beings.”⁷⁶ The influence was not merely pastoral. Ariana Patey has shown how this lesson in experiential compassion translated into Massignon’s scholarly study of mysticism.⁷⁷

Predominantly, however, Massignon emphasized Foucauld’s attraction to danger and his desire for martyrdom, as well as the circumstances surrounding his actual death. He learned from Foucauld that to follow Jesus means “imitating Him as much in His death as in his life.”⁷⁸ He read Foucauld’s passages on the love of God through the lens of the cross: “Love is defined by its formal object, and, when it has God for its object, it necessarily receives the form of Christ’s passion, and it is configured as such from the Last Supper to the Cross.”⁷⁹ He seemed also to turn Foucauld’s particular advice regarding moments of temptation into a general principle: “Make with Jesus to his Father a declaration of love, of pure love, in the spiritual dryness, the night, the estrangement, the appearance of abandonment, the self-doubt, in all the bitterness of love, without any of its sweetness.”⁸⁰ Just as one cannot separate Nazareth from the Cross in the life of Jesus, neither in the life of Charles de Foucauld can one separate Nazareth from his own martyrdom. It was the former that prepared him for the latter: “The hidden life in the house of Nazareth, this humble and modest grace, within reach of everyone, slowly, gently, and surely led Foucauld to the final heroism.”⁸¹ Finally, it is primarily

⁷⁶ Massignon, “Entire”: 22.

⁷⁷ Patey, Ariana. *The Life and Thought of Charles de Foucauld: A Christian Eremitical Vocation to Islam and His Contribution to the Understanding of Muslim-Christian Relations within the Catholic Tradition*. Ph.D. thesis at Heythrop College, University of London, 2012: 251.

⁷⁸ Massignon, “Union”: 103-04.

⁷⁹ Massignon, Louis. “Plus qu’un anneau scelle au doigt,” *EM* 1: 120.

⁸⁰ Massignon, “Entire”: 29.

⁸¹ Massignon, “Union”: 102.

Foucauld's martyrdom that makes him an inspirational source for the orientation of the Badaliya as articulated in the 1947 statutes: "It is up to us to continue the attitude of Saint Francis and Saint Louis towards those millions of souls who wait for us and look towards us; to we who are called to give testimony with our lives, and if God permits with our death, like Foucauld, who obtained martyrdom and even asked for it for his friends: to give to this Christ, who asks us to continue his passion, that *shahada* that we desire to offer to him, as unworthy of it as we are."⁸² In Massignon's appropriation of Foucauld's spirituality the inherent tension is almost completely resolved in favor of the cross.

The entire collection of eighty letters he received from Foucauld has been described as being for Massignon an "almost sacramental sign of his vocation as executor," but it is the last letter that held pride of place.⁸³ Foucauld wrote that letter just hours before he was murdered. In it he prays for the safety of Massignon, who was at that time fighting in the trenches, and he reports of his own situation: "Our corner of the Sahara is at peace." Massignon describes the moment he learned of Foucauld's death: "Beside myself, I climbed onto the parapet of the snow-covered trench, seized by a feeling of sacred joy, and cried out: 'He found his way, he succeeded!'"⁸⁴ The incongruity of their respective fates was not lost on Massignon: "By a strange switch, he was killed and I was protected."⁸⁵ Once again, as he had at his conversion, Foucauld saved him, but that only redoubled Massignon's sense of obligation to seek danger, for himself and with the members of the Badaliya: "The work of mercy to which we have been invited is to try to respond to [the Muslims'] clamor for justice (*sayha bi'l-haqq*) by entering into their most painful matters of conscience, when they entrust us with them in friendship. It is that 'go to the Front' that Foucauld called us to in his last letter: 'One must never hesitate to ask for the posts where the danger, the sacrifice and the devotion are the most. Leave honor to those who desire it, but always ask for danger and pain.' There is the true Arab 'jihad akbar,' this

⁸² Massignon, *Badaliya*: 3.

⁸³ Didier, Hugues. "Louis Massignon and Charles de Foucauld," *ARAM* 20 (2008): 345.

⁸⁴ Massignon, "Entire": 28.

⁸⁵ Massignon, "Entire": 28.

‘holy War’ leading to suffering from the same faults in the depth of himself that we want to make up for, to atone. Such substitution, ‘Badaliya,’ goes very far.”⁸⁶

That Foucauld’s own dangerous adventure in the Sahara ended in so inglorious a fashion, alone and without “any grand material results,” as Massignon put it, was as they say not a bug but a feature.⁸⁷ First of all, it identified him with the abandoned Jesus: “Foucauld led me to understand, in his lifetime, but above all by his death, that the priest is a deposit of the alms of eternal hospitality, which was bequeathed to him by one condemned to death at the moment he was betrayed, delivered, and executed.”⁸⁸ Many of the religious figures to whom Massignon was attracted were martyrs and stigmatics; many of them were women who experienced horrible ailments or extreme physical penances, and none of them was considered a grand success at the end of her or his life.⁸⁹ They include Blessed Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774-1824), Violet Susman (d. 1950), Marie des Vallées (1590-1656), St. Christine the Admirable (1150-1224), and St. Joan of Arc (1412-1431), as well as Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848-1907), St. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226), the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus (4th c.), and outside the Christian tradition Gandhi (1869-1948) and Hallaj (858-922), just to name a few. Most Catholics and Muslims would consider those figures to be obscure, if not dangerous in their embrace of suffering, but to Massignon they were the “real elite,” the hidden spiritual pillars of history and society, the substitute saints, and Foucauld belonged among them.⁹⁰ He joins those who, like Abraham before Sodom, intercede with God on behalf of their respective sinful communities, and who with Jesus offer themselves to God as willing and nonviolent sacrifices on behalf of others. Hence Massignon

⁸⁶ Annual Letter 1 in Massignon, *Badaliya*: 9. For the oft-told story of Massignon being attacked while delivering a lecture on Foucauld, see Six, *L’Aventure*: 302-03.

⁸⁷ Massignon, “Entire”: 29.

⁸⁸ Massignon, “Foucauld”: 114.

⁸⁹ St. Francis of Assisi may seem to be an exception, but in Louis Massignon’s vision Francis’ reception of the stigmata at Alvernia was the result of his failure to convert the Sultan at Damietta.

⁹⁰ See Massignon, Louis. “The Notion of ‘Real Elite’ in Sociology and in History,” *Testimonies*: 57-64.

could compare Foucauld to “Job the Patient...who became docile, in the most noble way, not as an abject slave under the whip of his master, but thanks to an interior comprehension, infused with fertile sadness, of a conception of human solidarity, even more, of a filial ransom to the Justice of God.”⁹¹ Foucauld was a “hostage and ransom, the guarantee of our Christian loyalty to the Muslims for whom the Guest is sacred.”⁹²

Massignon’s inclusion of Foucauld among the substitute saints is complicated by two inconvenient facts. First, although he was technically unarmed at the moment of his death, it is a stretch to say that he was a nonviolent and willing victim. Foucauld had fortified his hermitage with rifles and ammunition, preparing with the men of the village to fend off attacks by German- or Ottoman-trained militias. Plus, he volunteered to be mobilized and likely helped to coordinate the French Saharan defense. In the end he was lured out of his fort by a familiar voice and in a moment of panic shot and killed, probably unintentionally, by a fifteen-year-old boy. However, as Hugues Didier has remarked, “Foucauld could well have died with a weapon in his hands instead of being assassinated. And he would have done it *out of duty*.”⁹³ Working with the fact that Foucauld did not have a weapon in his hand, Massignon developed a creative interpretation of the scene: “If he decided at the end to keep a weapon in his Borj, he who had vowed never to have any weapon in his cell, it was because he was giving to his enemies ‘full dispensation to shed his blood’ in a lawful sacrifice.” He continues: “Foucauld changed for them in advance the designation of their murderous act: ‘Be the fighters of a holy war, and I will die a martyr.’ He was thereby entering into their hearts as an inebriating wine.”⁹⁴ In other words, it was not they who lured Foucauld out of the fort but Foucauld who lured them into taking his life, and in advance he knowingly and deliberately created the conditions that would allow his murderers to claim self-defense and thus to remain innocent before the human and divine law: “God would not be able to damn them, since he, their victim, forgave them.”⁹⁵

⁹¹ Massignon, Louis. “La douceur, qui naît des larmes, au desert,” *EM* 1: 121.

⁹² Massignon, “Foucauld”: 114.

⁹³ Didier, “Louis Massignon”: 341.

⁹⁴ Massignon, “Entire”: 31.

⁹⁵ Massignon, “Union”: 93.

The second inconvenience has to do with Islam. Foucauld undoubtedly loved his Touareg neighbors, but he was not enamored of Islam *per se* in the way that Massignon was.⁹⁶ Although he was attracted to Islam as a young man, and although Massignon regularly points to Foucauld's reverent treatment of the *Laylat al-Qadr* in his *La Reconnaissance au Maroc* (1888),⁹⁷ it remains that under the advice of his spiritual director Foucauld deliberately "fled Islam just as it is appropriate to flee a temptation."⁹⁸ He typically referred to Muslims as infidels; it has been said that he "hated the shari'a," and his writings are filled with calls for the conversion of Muslims in French colonies, albeit by gentle, patient, loving means.⁹⁹ When Massignon shared with him an early sketch of his understanding of Muslims as spiritual siblings in Abraham, Foucauld responded: "I would suppress the first point: meditation on the vocation given to the sons of Abraham and his servant. This can never be proven, and since Our Lord, all people have the vocation to be Christians."¹⁰⁰ Massignon rightly felt disappointed and misunderstood, so how could Foucauld be a model for the Badaliya whose members offered their lives for Muslims, "not so they would be converted, but so that the will of God might be accomplished in them and through them"?¹⁰¹

⁹⁶ For a Muslim appreciation of the life of Charles de Foucauld, see Merad, Ali. *Christian Hermit in an Islamic World: A Muslim's View of Charles de Foucauld*. Zoe Hersov, tr. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2000. For some implications of that appreciation, see Hersov, Zoe. "A Muslim's View of Charles de Foucauld: Some Lessons for the Christian-Muslim Dialogue," *Muslim World* 85.3-4 (July-October 1995): 295-316.

⁹⁷ See, for example, Annual Letter 10 in Massignon, *Badaliya*: 99.

⁹⁸ Didier, "Louis Massignon": 350.

⁹⁹ Didier, "Louis Massignon": 351. See also Dallh, Minlib. "Exploration in Mysticism and Religious Encounter: The Case of Charles de Foucauld (1858-1916)," *The Downside Review* 138.4 (2020): 139.

¹⁰⁰ July 15, 1916 in Six, *L'Aventure*: 206.

¹⁰¹ Gude, Mary Louise. *Louis Massignon: The Crucible of Compassion*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996: 134-35.

Despite recognizing that Foucauld had not entered Islam “axially” as he had,¹⁰² Massignon argued that it was “the whole mass of Muslim faithful for whom he died.”¹⁰³ Massignon’s claim once again employed a creative interpretation, this time of the symbolic context in which the death took place. Not only was Foucauld killed by Muslims, but near his dead body was found his monstrosity with the exposed Host, which told Massignon that Foucauld’s last hours were spent not only in writing letters but also in meditation on the self-offering of Christ.¹⁰⁴ His death was therefore linked to that of Jesus, who “gave himself completely broken and dying to make us live again, we his enemies, his murderers.”¹⁰⁵ Plus, according to Massignon, even though Foucauld spent his life immersed in Berber, his last words were uttered in Arabic, the sacred language of Islam: “I am going (or I wish) to die.”¹⁰⁶ Foucauld had therefore come to understand his end as a self-offering on behalf of *his* enemies and *his* murders, namely the Muslims. Massignon was not naïve about the interpretive leaps he was taking. He recognized that “Foucauld did not immediately understand his profound vocation as victim and intercessor and, I would say, as a saint ‘Islamized by his death.’”¹⁰⁷ It was Foucauld, however, who taught him that “one does not choose a vocation; one receives it.”¹⁰⁸ If Foucauld did not fully recognize his own vocation, “his work remains incomplete, and it is for us to perfect it.”¹⁰⁹ For example, Foucauld may have identified with the most abandoned, but it was Massignon who realized “that the most abandoned of people...are the Muslims: these mysterious people excluded from the divine preferences in history, though the sons of Abraham, and driven into the desert with Ishmael and Hagar.”¹¹⁰ He therefore felt responsible, as he wrote in

¹⁰² Massignon, “Foucauld”: 107.

¹⁰³ Massignon, “Entire”: 30.

¹⁰⁴ Massignon, “Doigt”: 119.

¹⁰⁵ Massignon, “Entire”: 31.

¹⁰⁶ Massignon, “Entire”: 26.

¹⁰⁷ Massignon, “Foucauld”: 109.

¹⁰⁸ Massignon, “Doigt”: 119.

¹⁰⁹ Massignon, “Doigt”: 119.

¹¹⁰ Massignon, “Entire”: 22.

a 1954 letter to Mary Kahil (1889-1979), to “complete him in the Badaliya where we love our Muslim brothers in his place, more than him.”¹¹¹

Jean-François Six has credited Charles de Foucauld, along with his contemporary St. Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-97), with being instrumental in effecting a shift in French, Catholic spirituality from a focus on God as Judge to one on God as Love.¹¹² There exists a tension, however, with his belief in a God who desires martyrdom and justifies violence, with his willingness to dismiss concerns about acting with pride, with his certainty about knowing Jesus’ will in favor of violence, and with his confidence in French moral superiority, but it is nonetheless true that his letters to Louis Massignon reveal that Foucauld was mostly centered in God’s attractive, gentle, healing, merciful, love. At the same time Massignon considered himself to be Foucauld’s spiritual “heir,”¹¹³ and it is true that he was deeply influenced by Foucauld’s eremitical immersion among the most abandoned,¹¹⁴ his ability to see the sacred in every human being, vision of Christians joined in a union of prayers, recognition of God’s work in the hidden life of Nazareth, his understanding of the Gospel as an invitation to join in Jesus’ saving mission, and willingness to “go to the front” if that is what God desires, but it cannot be said that Massignon, who once described prayer as the “daughter of the fear of both the Judgment and the Judge,”¹¹⁵ appropriated his teacher’s tender relationship with the gentle Divine Lover.¹¹⁶ The contrast can be highlighted briefly with three images.

¹¹¹ Massignon, Louis. *L’Hospitalité Sacrée*. Jacques Keryell, ed. Paris: Nouvelle Cité, 1987: 290.

¹¹² Six, *L’Aventure*: 207.

¹¹³ Massignon, Louis. “Les maîtres qui ont guidé ma vie,” *Horizons Maghrebins* 14-15 (1989): 159.

¹¹⁴ See chapter 7 of Ariana Patey’s aforementioned Ph.D dissertation: 239-77.

¹¹⁵ Massignon, Louis, “The Three Prayers of Abraham,” *Testimonies*: 4.

¹¹⁶ For a first-hand account of the deepening post-mortem influence of Foucauld upon Massignon, see Voillaume, René. “In Memoriam Louis Massignon,” *Presence de Louis Massignon: Hommages et témoignages*. Paris: Éditions Maisonneuve et Larose, 1987: 179-83.

First, like some other prominent Parisian intellectuals of his day, Massignon was attracted to the reported apparition of La Salette, in part because of the associated themes of warning, judgment, and punishment in relation to lukewarm Catholic belief and practice. When he asked Foucauld's opinion on the matter, the latter replied: "You asked what I think of Sister Marie of the Cross (Mélanie de la Salette) – My dear brother, I do not think anything. If Rome makes a decision on the subject, then I will follow what Rome says. I regard it as a fault—the fault of using time badly or of losing time—to spend time on this when so many souls do not know JESUS and their salvation depends on knowing Him." He continues: "Dear brother, stick to the simple things. Remember always and practically the divine word: The first commandment is to love God with all one's heart, and the second is to love one's neighbor as oneself. Everything is there and we must constantly return there. My children, love one another. That is the Master's precept, and it is enough."¹¹⁷

Second, when in 1903 his friend Dr. Hérison asked him how best to win the affection of the Touareg, Foucauld responded: "You must be simple, affable and kind.... In order to be loved, you must love them and make them feel that you love them. Don't be an adjutant or a doctor with them, and don't be offended by their familiarity or their easy manner. Be human, charitable, and always cheerful. You must always laugh, even in saying simple things. I, as you will see, laugh all the time, showing my bad teeth. Laughter creates good humor with them. It brings men closer together and helps them understand each other better. It cheers up a glum atmosphere, and that is charity. When you are with Touaregs, always laugh."¹¹⁸ Compare Foucauld's exhortation to laugh and to cheer up a glum situation with a heartbreaking excerpt from a 1960 letter that Louis Massignon wrote to Thomas Merton (1915-1968): "My case is not to be imitated; I made a duel with our Lord and having been an outlaw (against nature in love), against law (substituted to Muslims) and Hierarchy... (leaving my native proud Latin community for a despised, bridled and insignificant Greek Catholic Melkite church), I die lonely in my family, for whom I am a bore....

¹¹⁷ March 10, 1912 in Six, *L'Aventure*: 125.

¹¹⁸ Six, Jean-François. *Witness in the Desert: The Life of Charles de Foucauld*. Lucie Noel, tr. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965: 178.

I am a gloomy scoundrel.”¹¹⁹

Third, the tension in Foucauld’s spirituality is neatly captured in the image he designed of a cross above a heart accompanied by the words “Jesus Caritas.” It seems to represent both Foucauld’s insistence that one review the divine graces and the personal infidelities of one’s history as well as his twin attractions to the loving God and to martyrdom. As part of his mission to “complete” Foucauld, Massignon felt compelled to modify that image for the Badaliya: “He designed [the heart] asymmetrically, in order to show that it was living. And he adjoined the two words: ‘Jesus Caritas.’ [However] after having meditated, at Ephesus, in the country of the Dormition where the three witnesses of the thrust of the lance founded in solitude the Church of Contemplatives, it came to us that this blazon should be more precise. It was in 1953, praying for the Morocco that Foucauld so loved, that we understood that this heart must be ‘stigmatized’ and the script written in Arabic: ‘Yasu’ / ibn / Maryam / Huwa l-Hubbu,’ ‘Jesus / son of / Mary / He is love.’”¹²⁰ On the one hand, it is as though the cross is not enough to represent the pains of the world. Even the heart must be pierced. The substitutes know that, whether human or divine, love is always wounded and always involves suffering and sacrifice. On the other hand, Massignon’s translation of Foucauld’s motto is not simply into the language of Arabic but into the language of the Qur’an, where Jesus is known as the Son of Mary. It is a profound spiritual and theological gesture on behalf of a Catholic sodality, recognizing that Jesus is shared among Christians and Muslims and that the Church has an obligation to find some way to engage with Muslims not as rivals but as siblings.¹²¹ If Charles de Foucauld’s canonization represents for the Church an embrace of “universal brotherhood,” and a willingness, humbly, to be dependent upon

¹¹⁹ Quoted in Griffith, Sidney. “Thomas Merton, Louis Massignon, and the challenge of Islam.” *The Merton Annual* 3 (1990): 172.

¹²⁰ Massignon, Louis. “La blessure au côté,” *EM* 1: 123.

¹²¹ For a treatment of the ways Massignon theologically went beyond Foucauld as well as key differences between the Union and the Badaliya, see Dall’Oglio, Paolo. “Louis Massignon and Badaliya,” *ARAM* 20 (2008): 329-36.

and even saved by and through our neighbors,¹²² one must not lose sight of Louis Massignon's role in preserving and disseminating Foucauld's gifts as well as his own decisive role in the conversion of the Church's approach to Muslims as taught in *Nostra Aetate*.¹²³

Addendum

As I was putting the final touches on this article, it was revealed that after a two-year investigation a Vatican tribunal has convicted and defrocked Jean-François Six for having spiritually and sexually abused at least fifteen women from the 1950s through the 1990s.¹²⁴ His name appears throughout the body and the footnotes of this article. Louis Massignon personally chose Jean-François Six to succeed him as director of the Union, and together with Mary Kahil he personally chose Six to succeed him as convener of the Paris Badaliya. Whether Massignon knew anything about Six's behavior, or whether Six was influenced by Massignon's self-confessed misogyny, I do not know. It is horrible to have to mention such things, but in this era when the Church is finally confronting its legacy of abuse and concealment, we cannot remain silent. There is also an opportunity, if we are open to it, for

¹²² In 1908 Foucauld became terribly ill. He was in desperate need of nourishment, and even though the region was suffering under a severe drought, Foucauld's Touareg neighbors extracted whatever milk was available from the local goats and brought it to Foucauld. They nursed him back to health, and Foucauld apparently learned that he was even more dependent on his neighbors than they were on him. See Lepetit, Charles. *Two Dancers in the Desert: The Life of Charles de Foucauld*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983: 65.

¹²³ See Krokus, Christian. "Louis Massignon's Influence on the Teaching of Vatican II on Muslims and Islam," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 3 (2012): 329-45. See also Olizar, Isabel. "From the Margins to the Center: Exploring *Nostra Aetate* in the Lives of Charles de Foucauld, Louis Massignon, and Pierre Claverie," *Nostra Aetate, Non-Christian Religions, and Interfaith Relations*. Ellis, Kail, ed. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020: 138-61.

¹²⁴ <https://www.la-croix.com/Religion/Abus-sexuels-Jean-Francois-Six-renvoye-letat-clerical-2021-02-01-1201138298>

learning how to appropriate important Catholic figures critically, condemning, for example, the wicked behaviors of Six and the structures and theology that enabled them while appreciating the scholarly, organizational, and even spiritual gifts he bequeathed to ours and subsequent generations.

Living together is an art. It's a patient art, it's
a beautiful art, it's fascinating.

Pope Francis

CHARLES DE FOUCAULD: ACROBAT OF GOD WITHOUT A NET

Leo D. Lefebure

Charles de Foucauld presented multiple, shifting personae to the world, ranging from a spoiled, overweight, agnostic aristocrat nicknamed “Piggy,” to a mysterious wandering Jew, to a gaunt, underfed Catholic ascetic with a penetrating gaze. Again and again his decisions placed his life in danger, but, as his biographer Jean-Jacques Antier commented, “‘Security’; that was the least of Charles’ concerns! Acrobat of God, he chose to work without a net.”¹²⁵ His path was unconventional and often problematic, and he worried at times that he was not accomplishing anything of value. A restless heart kept driving him until he found a place in the desert where he could rest in the heart of Jesus.

Youth

Charles-Eugène de Foucauld was born into a wealthy, aristocratic family in Strasbourg on September 15, 1858. Among his earlier family were legendary figures like Bertrand de Foucauld, who died fighting under King St. Louis of France in the battle of Al Mansurah in the Seventh Crusade in 1250, and Armand de Foucauld, the vicar general of the Archdiocese of Arles who died as a martyr of the French Revolution in the September Massacres of 1792. Charles’s father, the Viscount Edouard de Foucauld, held a position inspecting forestry in Strasbourg. Both of Charles’s parents had died by the time he was but six years old, and he was raised by his maternal grandparents, Colonel Beaudet de Morlet and his wife. When war between France and Prussia began in 1870, the Colonel realized that Strasbourg was endangered; and he moved the family first to Brittany and then to refuge in Berne, Switzerland, before finally settling after the war in Nancy.

¹²⁵ Jean-Jacques Antier, *Charles de Foucauld*, trans. Julia Shirek Smith (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 147.

Charles's mother and then his grandparents gave him a very pious upbringing. Nonetheless, as an adolescent Charles questioned whether we could know anything of the reality of God, and by the end of 1874 he had lost his faith. He later described this period of his life in a letter to his cousin Marie de Bondy, "At seventeen, I was all egotism, all impiety, all desire for evil; it was as if I had gone a little mad."¹²⁶

Studying with the Jesuits at the Sainte-Geneviève School in Paris from 1874 to 1876 did not restore his faith. Intending to continue the military heritage of his family, in 1876 he entered the military academy Saint-Cyr, where he came to know many students who would become the leaders of the French Army in Algeria and World War I, including Philippe Pétain. These contacts would be important during his later time in North Africa. When Charles reached his twentieth birthday in 1878, he inherited a considerable fortune both from his parents and his grandfather, and he proceeded to spend it in pursuit of pleasure. As a young man in the army, he was a wealthy, overweight viscount in love with wine, good food, women, and the luxuries of this world; his lavish lifestyle earned him the nickname *Le Porc* ("the pig," or "Piggy").¹²⁷ He was graduated from Saint Cyr next to last in his class, but he went on for further military studies at the Cavalry School in Saumur. Both as a student and as a junior officer, he was repeatedly in trouble with his military superiors, and was finally put on non-active status as a punishment for "Consorting in public with a woman of loose morals."¹²⁸ Meanwhile, his family, exasperated by his extravagant expenditures, went to court to limit his access to his inheritance.

North Africa

News of a rebellion against the French Empire in North Africa aroused Charles's interest in returning to active duty, and he hastily asked permission to rejoin his unit and go to Algeria to take part in combat. In June 1881 he sailed from Marseille for Oran, Algeria.

¹²⁶ Charles de Foucauld, Letter to Marie de Bondy, April 17, 1892; cited by Antier, 31.

¹²⁷ Antier, 50.

¹²⁸ Antier, 54.

Once in Africa, the spoiled, bored playboy abruptly transformed into a courageous, disciplined cavalry officer who quickly became fascinated with Africa and the desert. In combat he demonstrated genuine bravery, risking his life and earning a reputation as an excellent officer. In Algeria Charles began what has been called his “first conversion.”¹²⁹ This was not a religious conversion but a quest for power and knowledge, an unbridled drive to learn all he could about this new environment. Unlike most French officers, he wanted to know the people of the land, and he began to study Arabic. He immersed himself in books about the history and geography of the Maghreb. Like Augustine of Hippo, Charles would go through more than one conversion; for both figures, the decision to seek wisdom and knowledge was an important, transformative moment.

After winning a reputation as a successful officer, Charles abruptly resigned from the French Army and resolved to do what no European had hitherto done: explore the uncharted interior and southern areas of Morocco, which was still independent from the European empires. In Algiers he made the acquaintance of an Irishman, Oscar MacCarthy, who had been a pioneering explorer of southern Algeria. MacCarthy supported Charles’s hopes, but he knew that Sultan Mouray Hassan of Morocco would be far away and had little control over these regions, and there would be no French Army at hand to rescue him. For safety, MacCarthy encouraged Charles to travel in the guise of a poor, wandering Jewish rabbi. MacCarthy introduced Charles to Mardochée Abi Serour, a Jewish man who had been born in southern Morocco and who became intrigued by the project and agreed to guide Charles. And so in 1883 the onetime aristocratic playboy disguised himself as a Jew and embarked with a Jewish guide on an epic and dangerous journey through the interior of Morocco, depending on Jewish hospitality, losing his money and nearly his life, but holding onto his scientific instruments and all the while compiling invaluable geographical information about areas unknown to Europeans.

¹²⁹ Antier, 59.

Because there was considerable prejudice against Jews from both Arab Muslims and French Catholics, the assumption of a Jewish persona was an experience of humiliation that would be a harbinger of Charles's later spiritual path. But for the moment his ambitions were scholarly, not spiritual. His goal was to write a major academic study of the geographical, social, and political conditions in this region. He was moved by the beauty of the landscape, the devotion of his Jewish hosts, and by the intensity of Muslims celebrating the night of power in Ramadan.¹³⁰ After traveling for months across the Atlas Mountains and the desert, Charles presented himself to the French consulate in Tisint, unrecognizable. The secretary could hardly believe this straggly, undernourished beggar was a French viscount, but after Charles had washed and changed his appearance, he was welcomed. The French consul offered him passage on a ship departing for Marseille, but Charles insisted he would travel overland through dangerous areas on a return trip to Algeria. The French chancellor could not believe that Charles intended to travel for two to three months through dangerous territory when a ship was waiting. After many months of further travel, Charles arrived in Algeria and presented himself to a French military base. Though he looked like an impoverished beggar, he presented a scrap of paper to be given to the commander: "Viscount Charles de Foucauld, Lieutenant in the African Fourth Chasseurs."¹³¹ At first none of the officers recognized him, but he greeted one by name, and suddenly his identity was accepted, and he was celebrated as a hero.

His scientific contributions were significant. He was the first Frenchman to cross the three Atlas mountain ranges. He had mapped 1,700 miles of previously unknown trails, as well as 3,000 elevations; and he had recorded thousands of observations. The Geographical Society of Paris recognized his scientific contributions by admitting him as a member in 1884 and by granting him its gold medal, its highest recognition of scholarly achievement, in January 1885. A few months later, the Sorbonne bestowed on him its own gold medal. He was restless to learn more, and so he returned to

¹³⁰ Antier, 78-79.

¹³¹ Antier, 82.

Algeria for further exploration in 1885. He came back to France in January, 1886, which would prove to be the decisive year in his religious journey.

Transformation in Paris

Charles settled into a routine of work in Paris, transforming his notes into the book that would appear in 1888, *Reconnaissance au Maroc*.¹³² His old friends recognized a profound change; the young playboy who loved to party was now immersed in academic work. He detached himself from romantic relationships with women, and he read the Holy Qur'an, recalling the devotion of Muslims in the Maghreb. "Islam has produced in me a profound upheaval," he later wrote in a 1901 letter to Henri de Castries. He continued, "Observing this faith and these souls living with God as a continual presence has allowed me to glimpse something greater and more true than worldly occupations."¹³³ But he did not see Islam as a divine revelation, and he was very critical of the prophet of Islam.

Charles began reading the writings of the famous seventeenth-century preacher and bishop, Jacques-Benigne Bossuet. He was especially moved by Bossuet's challenge to form in oneself "the Holy Trinity, unity with God, knowledge of God, love for God. And since our knowledge, which for now is imperfect and obscure, will depart, and since the love in us is the sole thing that will never depart, let us love, let us love, let us love."¹³⁴ He spent significant time with his cousin Marie de Bondy, who was a very devout Catholic. This prompted him to reflect: "Since she possesses such an intelligent soul, the religion in which she so firmly believes cannot be the madness I think it."¹³⁵

Charles would look back on this period of his life and, like Augustine of Hippo, see the hand of God at work in his life at a time when he did not recognize it. He was searching for a God who was

¹³² Charles de Foucauld, *Reconnaissance au Maroc*. 1888. Reprint, Vendres, France: Editions d'Aujourd'hui, 1985.

¹³³ Antier, 93.

¹³⁴ Antier, 94.

¹³⁵ Antier, 95

already close to him but whom he had not recognized: “I admired and wanted virtue, but I did not know you [God].”¹³⁶ The witness of Jews and Muslims to the one God impressed and intrigued him, but he did not yet have the gift of faith in any tradition. Reading Bossuet led him to ponder the necessity of faith, but he commented, “I seek the light and I do not find it.”¹³⁷

During this time of seeking and indecision, Charles met Henri Huvelin, the curate at Saint-Augustin Church, who was already the confessor of his cousin Marie and her mother. In his preaching Huvelin affirmed that Jesus came to save the suffering and the poor: “When we wish to convert a soul, we must not preach: we must show our love”; “Only God converts.”¹³⁸ Huvelin believed that the Eucharist is not a reward for the good but a power that can bring us to Jesus Christ.¹³⁹ On October 30, 1886, Charles went to meet Huvelin in the confessional before Mass. Charles explained that he did not intend to receive the sacrament because he did not have faith. He only wanted to learn about the Catholic religion. Huvelin instructed him to say the *Confiteor* and confess his sins. Charles did so, confessing sins from his entire life. The priest gave him absolution and asked him if he had eaten anything that day. On hearing that Charles had not eaten, Huvelin instructed him to receive Communion at the Mass that would follow. To his surprise, Charles experienced a deep sense of joy and peace, and his doubts had disappeared.

As soon as Charles came to faith in God, he knew that he would dedicate his entire life to serving God: “As soon as I came to believe there was a God, I understood that I could not do otherwise than live only for him. My religious vocation dates from the same hour as my faith.”¹⁴⁰ He embarked on a series of experiments in carrying out this mission. Charles placed his complete trust in Huvelin, who became his most trusted spiritual guide until the death of Huvelin in 1910. By 1888 Charles had left behind his interest

¹³⁶ Antier, 97.

¹³⁷ Antier, 98.

¹³⁸ Antier, 99.

¹³⁹ Antier, 103.

¹⁴⁰ Antier, 104.

in geography and science and also any concern for the fortune he inherited. Because Jesus had humbled himself and taken the last place, Charles wanted to follow his example, especially the hidden life of Jesus at Nazareth when he worked in obscurity and poverty in obedience to the Father. Charles stressed the importance of Jesus' abjection, encompassing his descent, his obscurity, and his rejection. Charles plunged into reading the lives of the Desert Fathers, as well as the writings of Teresa of Avila, who would become his most influential reading after the Bible.

Religious Life

In the summer of 1888 his cousin Marie de Bondy took him to visit a Trappist monastery, and he was attracted to this form of religious life. In 1890 he entered the Trappist monastery of Notre-Dame-des-Neiges in the mountains of Vivarais in the southeast of France. In June 1890 he moved to the Trappist monastery at Cheiklé in Syria (not far from Aleppo), which was dependent on Notre-Dame-des-Neiges. He lived as a Trappist monk for seven years. Because of his educated background and leadership skills, his superiors wanted him to be ordained a priest and eventually to serve as novice master or in higher positions. Charles became more and more dissatisfied, seeking greater experiences of poverty and abjection. In 1897 Charles was released from his vows by the Trappists, and he dreamed of founding a new community of Little Brothers of Jesus, who would live a life of strict poverty, manual labor, prayer, and service to the poor. He sought a life of greater renunciation and obscurity than he had with the Trappists.

Traveling to Palestine, he found a place serving the Poor Clares, the poorest order of nuns in Nazareth, where Jesus spent the years of his hidden life in obscurity. He contemplated the suffering of Jesus and his concern for the poor. He began to be called Brother Charles of Jesus. In prayer he knew both moments of exaltation and oneness with God and also moments of aridity and darkness. On June 6, 1897, he wrote words that would prove to be prophetic. He imagined Jesus speaking to him: "Think that you are to die a martyr, stripped of everything, stretched out on the ground, naked, unrecognizable, covered with wounds and blood, violently

and painfully killed, and do you wish that it were to happen today? Consider that your whole life is to lead you toward this death. And see thus the insignificance of so many things. Think often of this death, both to prepare yourself for it and to judge things at their true value.”¹⁴¹

Charles sought to imitate the hidden life of Jesus in everything he did. Early in 1898 he had experiences of mystical illumination during which he merged with Christ. When he returned to the monastery of the Poor Clares in Nazareth, they remarked the light of God shining in his face and deemed him a saint.¹⁴² The superior of the Poor Clares in Jerusalem wanted to meet him, and she hoped he would be ordained and be a chaplain to her community. He was ordained a priest of the Diocese of Vivriers on June 9, 1901; but instead of serving the Poor Clares in Palestine, he returned to Algeria to begin the final stage of his life.

Ministry in Algeria

In Beni Abbès, Algeria, an area recently conquered by the French not far from the border with Morocco, Charles built a hermitage where he lived simply and humbly, administering sacraments to French soldiers, and offering hospitality and charity to all in the area between 1901 and 1905. In 1905 he moved further south to Tamanrasset, in the region of the Ahaggar volcanic mountains, where he was more distant from French troops and other Catholics. Here he came to know and love the Tuareg people, and he worked on a four-volume Tuareg-French dictionary, which Maria Letizia Cravetto suggests can be viewed in his case as a form of spiritual and mystical practice.¹⁴³

Charles told his apostolic vicar, Bishop Guérin: “I am and shall remain a silent, hidden monk and not a preacher. I am too

¹⁴¹ Antier, 157-58. See also Charles de Foucauld, *Charles de Foucauld: Writings*, selected with an introduction by Robert Ellsberg (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 77.

¹⁴² Antier, 159.

¹⁴³ Maria Letizia Cravetto, “A New Mystic Practice? On Charles de Foucauld’s Tuareg-French Dictionary,” *Diogenes* 61/1 (2016): 89-96.

unworthy to proclaim the Gospel. I can only try to live it.”¹⁴⁴ He did not try to convert Muslims, and he came to believe that they could receive salvation from God on the path of Islam, as he wrote to a Protestant doctor: “I am here, not to convert the Tuareg in a single stroke, but to try to understand them and improve them. I am certain the Lord will welcome in heaven those who led good and upright lives, without their having to be Roman Catholics.”¹⁴⁵ Ariana Patey describes his approach to the people: “His missionary work was still based on his principle of silence. He never preached to the people; instead his discussions on religion were based meditating on commonalities between the two faiths and on moral issues.”¹⁴⁶ He sought to make Christ present to the Tuareg people and to all through his practice of silence, abjection, prayer, and service to the poor. They responded by viewing him as a *marabout*, and his reputation spread throughout the surrounding area. On one occasion the French General Lyautey worried about Charles travelling alone through the desert. Captain Regnault responded: “Sir, are you not aware that Father de Foucauld never needs an escort? Alone on horseback, he can pass by all the *rezzou* [bands of pillagers] without fear of rifle fire. The people he encounters on the road will prostrate themselves, kiss the hem of his burnous, asking for his blessing! Let him go.”¹⁴⁷

Charles wanted the French Empire to help the Gospel, but he viewed the colonial enterprise in practice as often a cause of shame.¹⁴⁸ He was very critical of many French practices that he viewed as unjust and oppressive, but he in principle fully embraced the French vision of a *mission civilisatrice*, bringing the benefits of Christianity and civilization. Thus he has been viewed as one of the French “colonial heroes”; Berny Sèbe notes that Charles was compared to Colonel T.E. Lawrence (“Lawrence of Arabia”)

¹⁴⁴ Antier, 207.

¹⁴⁵ Antier, 266.

¹⁴⁶ Ariana Patey, “Sanctity and Mission in the Life of Charles de Foucauld,” *Studies in Church History* 47(2011): 374 (365-375).

¹⁴⁷ Antier, 226.

¹⁴⁸ Antier, 207, 217.

for his knowledge of and integration into the indigenous people.¹⁴⁹ Charles had a major influence on the young Louis Massignon, who he hoped would join him in Algeria.¹⁵⁰ Massignon would later found a sodality of prayer for Muslims and would influence the young Msgr. Giovanni Battista Montini, the future Pope Paul VI.

Communion in Silence

One of the guiding principles of Charles's religious life was *Tibi silentium laus* ("Silence is praise to you").¹⁵¹ Jesus in his hidden life in Nazareth was silent, and Charles sought to imitate this aspect of Jesus's life. In a retreat at Nazareth Charles imagined Jesus speaking to him: "Prayer is any converse between the soul and God. Hence it is that state in which the soul looks wordlessly on God, solely occupied with contemplating him, telling him with looks that it loves him, while uttering no words, even in thought."¹⁵² In this communion of silent praise, Charles joined with his Muslim sisters and brothers in praise of the one God.

¹⁴⁹ Berny Sèbe, *Heroic Imperialists in Africa: The Promotion of British and French Colonial Heroes, 1870-1939* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2013), 203.

¹⁵⁰ Christian S. Krokus, *The Theology of Louis Massignon: Islam, Christ, and the Church* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2017), 10, 14-15.

¹⁵¹ Foucauld, *Writings*, 50.

¹⁵² Foucauld, *Writings*, 105.

BROTHER CHARLES AND THE VISITATION

Little Sister Kathleen of Jesus

In the silence of the desert, brother Charles's grave bears the inscription, "I want to cry the Gospel with my whole life." Those words summarize what he wanted to live: evangelization not through words but through a way of being. He drew his inspiration from the Visitation. Mary had entered Elizabeth's house not with a speech but a simple greeting. What she carried within awoke what Elizabeth bore deep inside. Today, in a world where encounter easily becomes confrontation, this approach can help foster a fruitful fellowship between religions. Brother Charles was a precursor of the "dialogue of life."

His discovery of the mystery of the Visitation

Brother Charles chose the Visitation as the patron feast of the congregations he dreamed of founding. He saw it as an icon of the contemplative vocation in mission countries. When doubts about his calling as a Trappist began to surface, he gained an insight into his *special vocation* as he contemplated the Visitation. He wrote to Fr. Huvelin¹⁵³:

About five and a half years ago I told you . . . that my dream was to imitate the Blessed Virgin in the mystery of the Visitation. Like her, I would silently bring Jesus and the exercise of the evangelical virtues, but not to the house of St. Elizabeth. I would go among non-Christians so as to sanctify them by the presence of the Blessed Sacrament and the example of Christian virtues.

In the Visitation, two movements that appeared to draw him in opposite directions came together. The first was a call to live in silence, alone with God. The image of this was Mary wrapped in contemplation of the One she bore within. Charles always considered silent contemplation to be his vocation and it was in harmony with his temperament. The other movement found its

¹⁵³ Spiritual director who was instrumental in his conversion.

expression in the word *brother* and urged him to go out and find Jesus in the least of his brothers and sisters. It was illustrated by Mary setting off in haste to meet her aged cousin. Brother Charles was often torn between what he felt to be his vocation and what seemed to be God's will. Yet it was precisely this tension which would lead him to sanctity.

Silent contemplation

When he looked back on his life, Charles realized that Jesus Christ had visited him in his own cousin Marie de Bondy. At the time of his conversion at 28, the strength of her testimony rested on her way of being. "A beautiful soul reinforced your work, my God, but by her silence, her gentleness and her goodness. She spread her fragrant perfume. You drew me by the beauty of a soul in whom virtue appeared so exquisite that it ravished my heart forever."¹⁵⁴

Her life spread its *perfume*. Brother Charles was fond of that metaphor.

Let us imitate Jesus. Let us be his instruments as Mary was. This mystery illustrates the duties of contemplatives towards non-Christians . . . a life that *is fragrant* with all the evangelical virtues. O my God, I always believed that this was what you wanted of me.¹⁵⁵

Evangelii Gaudium recalls that "It is not by proselytizing that the Church grows but by attraction". Gandhi's words about the gospel of the rose come to mind. "A rose does not need to preach. It simply spreads its fragrance. The fragrance is its own sermon."

Good perfume depends on body warmth to give off its scent. Using imagery from the Visitation, one might say that you need to "be pregnant" with Jesus in order to carry him to others. In the Visitation two pregnant women meet. Each carries a life which doesn't belong to her, but what each one bears speaks to what is most hidden in the other.

¹⁵⁴ Notes from retreat in Nazareth, November 8, 1898.

¹⁵⁵ Meditation on Luke 1:39-56, 1898.

When he first settled in Beni Abbès, brother Charles began to adopt the White Fathers' style of mission. He attempted to create a little Christian community with a few redeemed slaves and composed a catechism for their use. But very quickly he realized that before catechizing, he needed to create bonds with people. An important factor, perhaps decisive in the proclamation of the gospel was the quality of the messenger.

The good we achieve depends on what we are, not what we do or say. It depends on the grace that accompanies our actions, the extent to which Jesus lives in us, to which our actions are His, acting in and through us. May this truth always be present to our minds.¹⁵⁶

Going out to others

The Visitation implies silent contemplation *and* going out towards others. During the papal conclave in March 2013, Jorge Mario Bergoglio recalled the urgency of *going out* for the Church's mission today and he gives the example. After the annunciation Mary set off in haste even if prudence might have dictated otherwise. The need to announce is characteristic of Christianity. The Samaritan woman left her jar at the well in her haste to go tell those in her village about the one she had just encountered. Perhaps it is only when one announces Christ that one begins to grasp who he really is.

What Mary undertakes in the Visitation isn't a visit to her cousin so that they might console and edify each other . . . even less is it a charitable visit to help her during her last few months of pregnancy and labor. It's so much more than that. She sets off to sanctify and evangelize St. John, not by words but by silently bringing him Jesus, right into his own house. The same is done by monks and nuns vowed to contemplation in mission countries.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ Rule for the Association of Brothers and Sisters of the Sacred Heart, Art XXVIII, No. 3.

¹⁵⁷ Meditation, Nazareth, July 2, 1898.

One could judge these words to be those of a man insensitive to the difficulties related to a pregnancy late in life! But what Brother Charles writes squares with the Gospel narrative. If the main reason for Mary's visit to her cousin had been to help her it would have been normal that she remain until the baby's birth. Strangely, Luke records Mary's departure before narrating the birth of John the Baptist. Her visit seems to have been mainly to *greet* her cousin. That's where the text places the emphasis:

She entered the house of Zechariah and *greeted* Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the *greeting* of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. "For behold, when the voice of your *greeting* came to my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy." (Lk 1:40-44)

Mary herself had been visited by an angel who had greeted her with the words, "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you!" Immediately afterwards she set off for her cousin's, urged by a Word that had taken flesh in her. Brother Charles wanted to be taken up in that same movement.

The Greeting

As he grew in understanding of his vocation, Brother Charles began to refer to himself as a *missionary monk*, living an *apostolate of friendship*. Conversation was its privileged instrument. "I never hesitate to prolong conversations and let them last very long when I see that they are useful."¹⁵⁸ His goal in these conversations was to lead people to their better selves by addressing their conscience and appealing to those truths that flowed from their natural sense of religion. Love helped him discover how to go about speaking to each person.

Let us not forget that souls are different and that, following God's example, you have to draw some people one way, others another, guide some in one manner, others in another, each according to what God has put inside of them. It would be foolishness to have only one method and want everyone

¹⁵⁸ Letter to Msgr. Guérin, March 6, 1908.

to conform. You need to study people and lead them to God, each according to the way in which God calls them.¹⁵⁹

He no longer approached people as a caregiver, as he did in Beni Abbès, but as a friend. His apostolate of friendship was in imitation of the One who made himself close to each human being, revealing the pleasure God takes in entering into conversation with each one.

Brother Charles left traces of his conversations with the local Tuareg chief, Moussa ag Amastane. He would prepare them carefully since Moussa, being a nomad, you never knew when he would drop by. He kept a list of “Things to say to Moussa” of which the following are a few examples:

- Reduce expenses. Be humble. God alone is great. He who thinks himself great, or who seeks to be great, does not know God.
- *Never lie to anybody.* All untruth is hateful to God, for God is truth.
- Never praise anyone to their face. When you think highly of someone it comes out in your actions and confidence. No use in saying it. Flattery is shameful.

He also practiced his apostolate by conversation with Christians. Dr. **Hérisson recalls:**

Before sunset, Father took an hour’s recreation. He used to walk up and down beside his hermitage, chatting about all kinds of things. We would walk side by side, his hand on my shoulder as he laughed and told me about the Tuaregs and some of his memories. He would begin by asking me how I had spent the day. He got me to make a sort of examination of conscience, and blamed me if I had not attended to some Tuareg, or studied their language.

¹⁵⁹ Meditation on Psalm 51, Nazareth, 1897.

What did his Muslim friends think?

One might wonder what the inhabitants of the Sahara understood of the Visit that God was paying them in the Christian *marabout*. Brother Charles often asked himself that question. After his bishop's visit to Beni Abbès he noted:

In order to bring the Muslims to God, do you need to seek their esteem by excelling in certain things that they value? For example, by being bold, a good horseman, a lavish giver, etc. Or should you practice the Gospel in its poverty, trekking along on foot instead of mounted on a camel, doing manual work like JESUS in Nazareth? . . . The Muslims don't make a mistake. When they see a priest who's an able horseman, a good shot they say: "He's an excellent rider, no one can shoot as well as him." But they don't say he's a saint. Should a missionary lead the life of St. Anthony in the desert, they will all say, "He's a saint." Natural reason will often make them friends of the former; but when it comes to matters regarding their souls, they will only trust the latter.

During his trip to France with Oûksem in 1913, his Tuareg friends wrote to him. There are about twenty of these letters and they allow us to sense the relationship from their point of view.

It's me Chikat who says: warm greetings to my companion the marabout.

It's me Choumekki who says: warm greetings to the marabout and his sister.

Everyone is well. We have no news (of you).

It's me Oûksem who says, warm greetings to the marabout.

It's me Abahag who says, warm greetings to the marabout.

It's me Litni the kalipha who says, warm greetings to the marabout.

It's me Aflan who says, warm greetings to my father the marabout.

It's me Abdelqadir who says, I send a lot of greetings to the marabout.

It's me Adhan who says, warm greetings to the marabout

It's me Adhan who says, warm greetings to Oûksem.

It's me Oûksem who says, warm greetings to my namesake.

It's me Adhan who says: Mokhammed ag Chikat had a son.
He still doesn't have a name.

This shower of greetings recalls the Visitation. How much benevolence is packed into those few words!

Evangelized by the Muslims

Mary was changed by the Visitation. The recognition by Elizabeth of what she carried within changed the young girl from Nazareth into the woman who proclaims the Magnificat. Brother Charles was also changed through his life with his *Muslim parishioners*. True encounters always sharpen our own sense of identity.

Shortly after his arrival in Tamanrasset brother Charles wrote to his cousin "Having little warm clothing, the Tuareg do not go out much during the winter. Besides, they're not in much of a hurry to visit me. The ice needs to be broken." Six years later he wrote to a friend: ". The Tuareg are very consoling company. I cannot express how good they are for me, how many upright souls I find among them; one or two of them are real friends, something that is everywhere so rare and so precious."¹⁶⁰ One of these friends was called Abahag. In another letter Br Charles commented, "How did they become my friends? In the same way that we make bonds among ourselves. I don't give them any presents; but they came to understand me as their friend, that I was true and could be trusted. And they have reciprocated the same attitude towards me."¹⁶¹

In general, Brother Charles wrote his daily diary with telegraphic succinctness but on learning of Abahag's illness, he

¹⁶⁰ Letter to Henry de Castries, January 8, 1913.

¹⁶¹ Letter to Brig. Garnier, February 23, 1913.

became more detailed. “October 23, 1914—found out tonight that Abahag has been unconscious since last evening. He suddenly developed very high, malarial fever. He had had a bit of fever earlier but it didn’t seem very serious.” The next day he noted, “October 24, 1914. Abahag died today around 4 in the afternoon. He was buried at 6pm. Took part in the burial.”

That very evening, he took the sealed envelope containing his own last will and testament and wrote on the back: “I wish to be buried where I die, a simple burial, no coffin, very simple grave, no monument, just a wooden cross. October 24, 1914.” Abahag’s burial seems to have helped him define how he wanted to live and die.

The joy of the Visitation

The story of the Visitation is suffused with joy. Those who knew Brother Charles often commented on his joy. When Dr. Hérisson asked him for advice on how to approach the Tuareg, Charles replied:

Be human, charitable, *and always joyful*. You must always laugh, even in saying the simplest things. I, as you see, am always laughing, showing my ugly teeth. Laughter sets the other person at ease. It draws people closer together, allowing them to understand each other better. It can brighten up a gloomy character, it is a charity.¹⁶²

Where did that joy come from? Certainly, it flowed from his life in God, but surely it also came to him from the “very consoling company” he kept with his Tuareg friends. Brother Charles reminds us that the Church rediscovers her joy and youth when she crosses the institutional threshold and goes out to meet the men and women of our world.

¹⁶² Bazin, p. 285.

CHARLES DE FOUCAULD: A LIFE IN DIALOGUE

Marc Hayet

Charles de Foucauld himself recounted how he came back to his childhood faith, and how this return was an encounter with Jesus of Nazareth, rediscovered as a close living friend, with a deep desire to, «... breathe only for Him...» as he likes to repeat. To a friend, he explains, «*I have lost my heart to this JESUS of Nazareth crucified 1900 years ago and I spend my life seeking to imitate him as closely as I can, in all my weakness.*»¹⁶³ »

But what is remarkable about his journey is that, always in the name of the imitation of Jesus of Nazareth, he will go from a life of radical separation from the world (as a monk behind cloistered walls and as a hermit in a garden shed) to a life integrated in a milieu very different from his own – the Tuaregs of Algeria – in which he allows himself to be welcomed by the people. When Charles arrives in Algeria at the end of 1901, he comes with the desire to meet others, to encounter the one who is furthest, the most different. Of these last years of his life, we can say that he lived them « in dialogue ».

Curiously, the word « dialogue » is absent from the vocabulary of Charles de Foucauld, we never come across it in the many writings and letters he left us! But, while he doesn't possess the word, he possesses the practice. He himself alludes to this when, for example, he writes to the apostolic prefect of the Sahara, « *Living alone in a place is a good thing. You achieve something even if you don't do much, because you start to belong to the country. You're approachable and unimposing there: it gives you such littleness!*»¹⁶⁴ : belonging « to the country », little and approachable, involves making an effort to erase the distances which prevent communication. A few months before his death, he gives a sort of rereading of his life: in search of a priest who could take charge of the Confraternity which he would like to create, he writes : « I consider myself less capable of tackling this enterprise than almost any other priest, *having learned only how to pray in solitude, keep*

¹⁶³ Letter to Gabriel Tourdes, 7th of March 1902.

¹⁶⁴ Letter to Mgr Guérin, 2nd of July 1907.

*silence, live with books, and at most, chat intimately one-on-one with poor people*¹⁶⁵ » : a magnificent intuition of that which he probably succeeded in the most, learning to « chat intimately one-on-one with poor people » ; this can be learnt! And God knows the number of hours that Charles de Foucauld spent decoding the language, culture, customs and family structures of the Tuaregs whom he asked for hospitality...

It might be useful to remember in this introduction that, passionate for Jesus of Nazareth, as we have mentioned, Charles de Foucauld also burns with the desire to make known the one who gives him life: « Light a fire on the earth » is the phrase of the Gospel which he chose to write on the souvenir card of his priestly ordination : his most beautiful intuitions on dialogue can be situated in the context of making known the Gospel which burns in him to « the brothers of Jesus *who don't know him* ¹⁶⁶»... We mustn't forget either the ecclesiastical or theological context of his time, the doctrine of « No salvation outside of the Church » was the background common to all Christians and missionaries.

* * *

Even if Charles de Foucauld didn't spell out a theory of dialogue, we can nonetheless recognise in his writings elements which show how he conceived of it:

« Banish the militant spirit »

*« Banish far from us the militant spirit. "I send you like sheep amongst wolves", says JESUS... What a big difference between the way Jesus acts and speaks and the militant spirit of those who are not Christian or who are bad Christians and who see enemies to be combated, instead of seeing sick brothers who must be cared for; wounded people lying in the road for whom we must be good Samaritans... Not being militant with anyone: JESUS taught us to go "like sheep amongst wolves", not to speak bitterly, harshly or insultingly or to take up arms.*¹⁶⁷ »

¹⁶⁵ Letter to Father Voillard, 11th of June 1916.

¹⁶⁶ Notes from the retreat before his priestly ordination, June 1901.

¹⁶⁷ Letter to Joseph Hours, 3rd of May 1912.

“Banish the militant spirit”, today we would say « refuse all proselytism ». This means refusing to convince others at all costs, refusing to place ourselves on the level of a battle of hotly defended ideas («bitterly, harshly or insultingly or to take up arms»); this means trying to understand others, what the obstacles to dialogue are within them, what makes them «sick... wounded» as Brother Charles says.

Recognising the other’s value, their part of truth

« Islam is very seductive. It seduced me greatly. But the Catholic faith is true. It’s easy to prove and consequently all the others are false... Well, where there is error there is always harm (even if *the truths that exist amongst the errors are good, and are always capable of producing great and true good, which is the case for Islam*)¹⁶⁸ ».

Marked, as we have said, by the ideas of his time (expressed very clearly in the first part of this text !...), it is given to him to see further and to open up a space which enlarges the horizon : recognising the other person as a bearer of the truth ; recognising that this truth is good in itself, and that, consequently, it is normal that the person we are speaking to be attached to it with the keys that he disposes of to interpret it ; recognising that this good is called to bear fruit and fruit in truth.

It’s quite interesting to see that at the end of his life, Charles de Foucauld often insisted on this attitude of trust we must have in the work of truth in the heart of each person, a great trust in the uprightness of people: every human being is capable of discerning what is good, desiring it and conforming their life to it. In his final years, Charles worked very hard to establish an association open to all Christians (priests, lay people, single people, married people, religious brothers and sisters) which would have a triple goal : 1- placing the Gospel at the centre of one’s life and living from it ; 2- loving the Eucharist, the sacrament of life freely given, and living from it; 3- working to make the Gospel known to those who are far from it. And he writes a sort of Rule of Life for the members of this union, the *Directory*. It is striking to observe his insistence on the idea that, before any speech, Christians put into practice the

¹⁶⁸ Letter to Henri de Castries, 15th of July 1901.

great dimensions of life: love, respect of others, sobriety of life, etc. These great values can speak to the intelligence and the heart of all: each person, in discovering the fruit that they bear when they are lived, might desire to immerse themselves in these values and put them into practice.

The fundamental attitude of dialogue: believing that the other person is sincere and sincerely seeks with the light that they dispose of, not doubting their good faith, not doubting their capacity to be open. Thus begins a path travelled together on which each person can be enriched by the values of the other person.

Entering a relationship of reciprocity: the story of Tarichat

« During the massacre at the Flatters mission, a Tuareg woman from a noble family had a very beautiful attitude, she opposed herself to the killing of the wounded, took them in and nursed them in her home, refusing entrance to Attissi, who [...] wanted to finish them off himself, and after their recovery, had them repatriated to Tripoli. She is now between 40 and 43 years old, has a great deal of influence and is renowned for her charity.

Is this soul not ready for the Gospel? Would it not be called for to write to her simply to tell her that the charity she never tires of practicing and with which she took in, nursed, defended, and repatriated the wounded from the French mission, 22 years ago, is known to us and fills us with joy and gratitude to God... God said, "The 1st religious commandment is to love God with all your heart. The 2nd is to love all people, without exception, as yourself." God also said, "You are all brothers. You all have the same Father, God"; and "The good and the bad that you do to others, you do to God". Admiring and thanking God to see you practicing charity towards people which is the second obligation, the first being love of God, we write this letter to tell you that among Christians (all those who) hear about you, will bless you, praise God for your virtues, and will pray to Him to fill you with grace in this world and glory in heaven... We also write to you to insist that you pray for us, certain that God, who has placed such a firm desire to love and serve in your heart, listens to the prayers that you address to Him, we ask you to

*pray for us and for all people, that we may love and obey Him with all our soul. To Him be glory, blessing, honour, praise, now and forever. Amen.*¹⁶⁹ »

We find here the deep motivation of Charles de Foucauld: on hearing of this woman's attitude, he would like to get in touch with her to announce the Gospel, from which, in his eyes, she already lives. But how does he go about this? Firstly, by expressing himself in a manner comprehensible to her: Charles starts his projected letter with two quotations from sacred texts and closes with a formula praising God; this is a concrete way of entering the cultural universe familiar to a believing Muslim, in order to facilitate the exchange.

Then Charles expresses to his interlocutor, the good that he sees in her and how much he values this good; second fundamental attitude of dialogue...

But what is even more remarkable – if we remember the ecclesiastical context of the time, more than a hundred years ago – is the fact that, as a Catholic priest, he asks a Muslim woman to pray for him and for all people while expressing the certainty that God will answer her prayer, given the manner in which she practices love for her neighbour. This is not relativism: it is, for Charles de Foucauld, a reflection of the Catholic tradition at its deepest, recognising that our diverse paths of faith can be measured by the quality of our service to the weakest. And that, on this path, we can learn and receive from the other person.¹⁷⁰

We have confirmation of this reciprocal giving and exchanging in the very writings of Charles: he spent a great deal of time talking with people, especially in Beni-Abbes and Tamanrasset ; he held some real friendships with a few, friendships made of trust and reciprocal service, exchanges of advice:

« I have at least four « friends » here on whom I can count completely. How did they become my friends? In the same

¹⁶⁹ Journal entry at Beni Abbès 21/06/1903

¹⁷⁰ Charles de Foucauld talks about all of this in his own context, but these elements of dialogue are, of course, applicable to any everyday situation in which we find ourselves...

way that we form bonds among ourselves. I didn't give them any presents; but they understood that they had a friend in me, that I was devoted to them, that they could trust me, and they have reciprocated the same attitude towards me... [...] There are others whom I like, whom I hold in high esteem, on whom I can count for many things. But these four, I can ask for any sort of advice, information or service and be sure that they will give of their best to me.¹⁷¹ »

We mustn't forget that when he was very sick in the Winter of 1907-1908, it was the Tuaregs who took care of him and saved his life: he will remain very grateful to them.

Listening to the “language” of the other person: allowing oneself to be touched by life

It is not our goal to talk about the enormous scientific contribution made by Charles de Foucauld to the understanding of the Tuareg language – a contribution which serves as a reference to this day – except to remind ourselves of the number of hours that Charles spent in dialogue with people in order to listen to, understand and enter into the richness of a culture through its poems, proverbs, social organisation, etc.

Over and above this work on the language, there is also an attention to the life of people around him, their feelings, their being: life is a language which one must learn to listen to. This is a constant on the journey of Charles de Foucauld: allowing himself to be questioned by what he perceives of the life of the world around him, to the point of changing direction thanks to these silent interrogations. Entering into dialogue is accepting the risk that the life of another person questions and changes me...

We already find this during his journey to Morocco:

« Islam made a very deep impression on me. The sight of such faith, of people living continually in the presence of God, gave me an insight into something greater and truer than worldly pursuits: “*ad majora nati sumus*¹⁷²”... *I started studying Islam,*

¹⁷¹ Letter to Garnier, 23rd of February 1913.

¹⁷² « We are born for greater things »

then the Bible, and by the action of God's grace, my childhood faith found itself affirmed and renewed...¹⁷³ »

When he is a Trappist, it is also the situation of the people around him which questions and destabilises him and transforms his dreams:

« Eight days ago, I was sent to attend the wake of a poor local Catholic who had died in the next village: what a difference between his house and our buildings. I long for Nazareth...¹⁷⁴ »

« Our biggest job is the work in the fields: [...] The day before yesterday we finished the harvest. It is the work of peasants, work that is infinitely good for the soul: while occupying the body, it leaves time for the soul to pray and meditate. And this work, more difficult than one would think if one had never done it, imparts such compassion for the poor, such charity for workers, for labourers! One realizes the price of a piece of bread when one sees for oneself how much suffering it costs to produce!...¹⁷⁵ »

Later, in Nazareth, it is also when he realises that he himself is well treated while other visitors to the monastery are less so that he experiences a certain discomfort and begins to think about leaving :

« The Mother Abbess is always so good to me, so good that she is always inventing new ways of being kind to me; and the whole community does the same... But this in itself bothers me; and this is why: I don't want to be ungrateful; but I don't want to fall into flattery, which is just as undignified; however, if the Reverend Mother has this extreme goodness towards me, [...] this doesn't prevent her from being quite hard, quite cold and harsh on others who are better than me and who, in any case, are all members of Jesus [...]... There is sometimes an absence of charity, or even justice which puts me in a difficult situation, even more so because nobody dares mention it to me – people know, or guess what I would say about it – and everybody

¹⁷³ Letter to Henri de Castries, 8th of July 1901.

¹⁷⁴ To Marie de Bondy, 10th of April 1894

¹⁷⁵ To Mimi, his sister, 3rd of July 1891

tries to hide these things from me... [...] One should be frank and honest by explaining things frankly: but I cannot do so without causing problems *for those who come to me with their suffering, [...] and thus, not to fall into flattery, or be complicit, or in any way participant in this manner of doing things, I've thought more than once about leaving and taking advantage of this departure to go to a place in which I am truly, and remain, absolutely unknown* »¹⁷⁶

It is interesting, in this last citation, to note that, as much of a hermit as he is in his garden shed, he is in contact with people and listens to them attentively enough to receive their confidences and the expression of their suffering: this listening to the lives of others shakes him and questions him to the point of envisaging a change of direction...

And we might suppose that it was because he knew his friend and his capacity to allow life to question him, that Laperinne wrote Charles the account of the charity of Tarichat: a way of peaking his interest in making contact with the Tuaregs, which will eventually lead him to settle in Tamanrasset...

* * *

Perhaps we can conclude this rapid overview of the way in which Charles de Foucauld envisages dialogue by taking a look at what is, no doubt, the key to understanding his attitude. In the letter which we quoted at the beginning, in which Charles advises to « banish the militant spirit », he clearly expresses that to him, there is only one way of entering into a true relationship with someone: it is «through goodness, tenderness, fraternal affection, the example of virtue, by humility and gentleness which are always attractive and so very Christian». He will insist, throughout his life, on this dimension of tenderness which opens doors: « ***Have that tender kindness which enters into the details and knows, through little nothings, how to put balm on people's hearts*** »¹⁷⁷. And he summarises all of this in

¹⁷⁶ To Father Huvelin, 22nd of March 1900.

¹⁷⁷ Meditation on the Gospel of Mark (5,35-43): the resurrection of Jairus'

a deep and simple formula which he underlines himself, « *Above all, see in each human being, a brother*¹⁷⁸». To live in dialogue, is to see all those whom I encounter as brothers and sisters, and act towards them in such a way that they themselves can «*look on me as their brother, the universal brother!*»¹⁷⁹» For the key to dialogue is always in the other person's hand: I can hold out my hand, it is always the other person who might seize it and say to me, «Come in, you are my brother!»

daughter

¹⁷⁸ Letter to Joseph Hours, 3rd of May 1912

¹⁷⁹ Letter to Marie de Bondy, 7th of January 1902.

THE “UNIVERSAL BROTHER” BLESSED CHARLES DE FOUCAULD: HIS LIFE AND RELEVANCE TODAY

Rita George Tvrtković

“Blessed Charles directed his ideal of total surrender to God towards an identification with the poor, abandoned in the depths of the African desert. In that setting, he expressed his desire to feel himself a brother to every human being, and asked a friend to ‘pray to God that I truly be the brother of all.’ He wanted to be, in the end, ‘the universal brother.’ Yet only by identifying with the least did he come at last to be the brother of all.”

--Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*

In the very last lines of Pope Francis’s newest encyclical above, just released in October 2020, the Holy Father holds up Blessed Charles de Foucauld(d. 1916) as a model of universal brotherhood. Only a few months earlier, in May 2020, the Vatican Congregation for the Causes of Saints cleared Blessed Charles for canonization. So who was Charles de Foucauld and why does his life matter today?

His Life

Vicomte (Viscount) Charles-Eugène de Foucauld was born on September 15, 1858, in Strasbourg, France. He came from a noble, wealthy, ancient family, whose lineage can be traced as far back as the tenth century; ancestors included Crusaders, royal consorts, churchmen, and philanthropists. His family’s prominence is evident by the very existence of a photograph of young Charles with his mother Élisabeth de Morlet and baby sister Marie, circa 1863, at a time when few could afford a portrait in the new medium of photography. It was not long after the photo was taken that Charles, at age six, lost both parents and his grandmother; he and Marie were raised by their grandfather. By the age of 22, Foucauld had left the Catholic faith, been expelled from a Jesuit school, squandered much of the family fortune he inherited, finished last in his class at a military academy, joined the French army, and took his mistress with him on a military expedition to Algeria and Tunisia.

While in North Africa, he became enthralled with the beauty of the land and touched by the piety of local Muslims. He wanted to visit Morocco, but the country prohibited European visitors at the time, so he disguised himself as a Moroccan Jew, calling himself “Rabbi Joseph.” He eventually traveled over 3000 kilometers in a country largely unknown to Europeans, secretly keeping a journal and surveying the land as he went; for this, he received a gold medal from the French Geographic Society. When he returned to Paris and published his journal and surveys in a book, *Reconnaissance au Maroc*, he became somewhat famous. But Foucauld did not care about fame or fortune; instead, he started to pray and reminisce about his humble North African journey, which he considered a kind of pilgrimage. He also began to contemplate entering religious life.

Foucauld joined the Trappists in 1890, but soon thirsted for an even more austere lifestyle. After just seven years, he left the Trappists and went to Nazareth, where he lived as a hermit in a tool shed and did manual labor for the Poor Clares who hosted him. It was in Nazareth that he began to write his “Rule for Little Brothers.” After moving back to France and being ordained a priest, he realized that his vocation was to live among the most needy, the people he called the “lost sheep”: the Muslims of North Africa.

Foucauld began his new ministry in earnest at Beni Abbès, a tiny oasis town on the border of Algeria and Morocco. Within a few years, he went even further a field, to the remote Saharan outpost of Tamanrasset, in southern Algeria, where he set up a hermitage at nearby Assekrem (a three-day camel ride from town) to live among the nomadic Tuareg Muslims. He described his time there as one of prayer and mutual hospitality: the locals welcomed him, and he in turn opened his hermitage to guests of all kinds, at all hours. With Christ’s command “whatever you did for the least of my brothers and sisters, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40) ever in his mind, Foucauld hoped that his Muslim neighbors would see him as their brother. He also hoped other Christians would join him in his new order, which he called “The Fraternity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.” His idea of fraternity was not limited to monks or even to Christians: “I want all inhabitants, be they Christian, Muslim or Jewish, to look on me as their brother, the universal brother.”

Perhaps his vision was ahead of its time, for the hermitage was a failure. No one joined. And he gained not a single Muslim convert. After twelve years, some might have wondered about the purpose of his mission. Aside from translating the Gospels into Tuareg, and compiling a Tuareg-French dictionary, what had he accomplished? But to him, this hospitable yet solitary desert life was the most authentic imitation of Christ: he led a simple life among the poor, he prayed and worked (*ora et labora*—the Trappist and Benedictine creed), and most importantly, he lived in harmony with his Muslim neighbors. Locals considered him a *marabout* (holy man).

On December 1, 1916, Foucauld was killed by Tuaregs from a different village. With his death, it might appear that his vision for a religious order founded on brotherhood had ended. But eventually, Foucauld's idea caught on, in part thanks to the biography by René Bazin, *Charles de Foucauld: Explorateur du Maroc, Ermite au Sahara*, published in 1921. By 1933, Foucauld's successors had founded a new religious order, the Little Brothers of Jesus, with the Little Sisters of Jesus following soon after in 1939. Today, nineteen religious orders, secular institutes, and lay associations trace their roots to Foucauld and his idea of universal fraternity. While the hermit might have died alone in the Algerian wilderness, he eventually birthed a large spiritual family, with many "children" around the world.

His Relevance

Today, some have criticized Foucauld as an agent of French colonialism. And indeed, the native of Strasbourg likely would never have traveled to North Africa if not for French colonialism. But Foucauld's supporters emphasize his evolution from desiring to convert his Muslim neighbors to desiring their friendship and fraternity. Foucauld's mission of presence, which he dubbed "doing good in silence" is an approach that would be imitated eight decades later by the French Trappists of Tibhirine, Algeria, who likewise considered their mission one of presence. They too befriended their Muslim neighbors, served them in the local medical clinic, stood by them in solidarity during a bloody civil war, and were killed by extremists in 1996. Since we only have access to Charles de Foucauld's desert life via photographs, watching the

film *Des hommes et des dieux* (Of Gods and Men, 2010), which depicts the affection between the Tibhirine Trappists and their Muslim neighbors, might give us a sense of what Foucauld's life in Algeria was actually like. We know that the abbot of the Tibhirine Trappists, Christian de Chergé, was inspired by Foucauld, having read about him while studying at the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies (PISAI) in Rome. Chergé even confirmed his religious vocation to live among Muslims by going on a two-month solitary retreat at Foucauld's old hermitage in Assekrem. He expressed this vocation in myriad ways at his Our Lady of Atlas Monastery in northern Algeria; for example, Chergé hung a sign that read "Muslims welcome for retreats here," and co-founded a local interfaith dialogue group. Clearly, Christian and Charles were kindred spirits, following similar life paths. Like Foucauld, Chergé began as a military man in North Africa, as part of the French colonial machine, and yet, both men, by virtue of their long-term spiritual commitment to North Africa and its people, had memorable encounters with holy Muslims who profoundly deepened their own Catholic faith.

But Foucauld was not only influential after his death; he had proteges even during his lifetime. For although he lived alone in his desert hermitage, he maintained a correspondence with friends and colleagues abroad, most notably Louis Massignon (d. 1962). Massignon was a French Catholic scholar of Islam who would go on to teach two key framers of *Nostra Aetate's* section 3 on Islam: the Dominican Georges Anawati and the Missionary of Africa Robert Caspar. Massignon's own spiritual path was deeply influenced by Foucauld, who the scholar describes in an article devoted entirely to him: "Foucauld was given to me like an older brother and helped me to find my brothers in all human beings, starting with the most abandoned ones."¹⁸⁰ Massignon considered Foucauld to be an extraordinary missionary because he rarely preached but instead "came to share the humble life of the most humble, earning his daily bread with them by the 'holy work of his hands,' before revealing to them, by his silent example, the real spiritual bread of hospitality

¹⁸⁰ Louis Massignon, "An Entire Life with a Brother Who Set out on the Desert: Charles de Foucauld," in *Testimonies and Reflections: Essays of Louis Massignon*, ed. and trans. Herbert Mason (University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), p. 22.

that these humble people themselves had offered him.”¹⁸¹ Foucauld had such an impact on Massignon that he believed the hermit was one of several intercessors praying for him on the night of his crisis and conversion in 1908. Soon after, Massignon wrote Foucauld a letter of thanks, and they began a correspondence. They finally met in Paris in 1909 and promised to pray for each other daily. After Foucauld’s death, Massignon was influential in keeping alive Foucauld’s vision of an order devoted to universal brotherhood.

Foucauld also influenced the spirituality of other prominent lay Catholics of the twentieth century, including the American Dorothy Day and the French husband-wife duo Jacques and Raïssa Maritain. In their book *Liturgy and Contemplation*, the Maritains expressed their admiration for the vocation of Foucauld and his Little Brothers: “it seems that constant attention to the presence of Jesus and fraternal charity are called to play a major role...we believe that the vocation of those contemplatives thrown into the miseries of the world, the Little Brothers of Charles de Foucauld, has in this respect a high significance.”¹⁸² Dorothy Day, who once gave a retreat centered on the life of Charles de Foucauld, explains why she was so inspired by him and the Little Brothers and Sisters: “One of reasons that I am so strongly attracted to the spirit of this ‘family’ is of course its emphasis on poverty as a means, poverty as an expression of love, poverty because Jesus lived it. And then too the emphasis on humble manual labor is for all.”¹⁸³ Thanks to their stress on manual labor and service to the poor, Foucauld’s Little Brothers and Sisters also influenced the French worker-priest movement of the 1950s.

Today, communities of Little Brothers and Sisters of Jesus can be found in nearly 90 countries around the world, not only in Charles’ beloved Algeria, but also Burkina Faso, Papua New Guinea, Syria, England, Haiti, Canada, Bolivia, India, and Vietnam, just to name a few. And as Charles de Foucauld moves closer to sainthood, more and more lay people are discovering him through popular Catholic literature such as the collection of Foucauld’s writings edited by Robert Ellsberg (Orbis Press, 2005), and the book about him

¹⁸¹ Massignon, “An Entire Life with a Brother,” pp. 22-23.

¹⁸² Jacques and Raïssa Maritain, *Liturgy and Contemplation* (New York: P.J. Kenedy & Sons, 1960), p. 76.

¹⁸³ Dorothy Day, “Retreat,” *The Catholic Worker*, August 1959, 2, 7, 8.

written by a Muslim, *A Christian Hermit in an Islamic World: A Muslim's View of Charles de Foucauld*, by Ali Merad (Paulist Press, 2000). Online references to Foucauld abound as well. To cite just one example: Fr. James Martin, an American Jesuit with 636,000 Facebook followers posted this in May 2020: "Saint Charles de Foucauld, pray for us! I knew the Little Sisters of Jesus when I was living in Nairobi, Kenya, and I don't think I have ever met any religious group of women or men who lived more simply or were so joyful. Their hospitality and joy led me to a deep devotion to Charles." A Google search for the name "Charles de Foucauld" results in scores of blog posts, penned by scholarly and grassroots authors alike.

Today, Charles de Foucauld has wide appeal due to his simplicity, spirituality, and love for the poor. However, he remains most influential among Christians engaged in dialogue with Muslims. As already noted above, Pope Francis has been so taken by Foucauld that he holds him up as a model of fraternity. It seems likely that Francis also sees him as a model of interfaith dialogue too, given that the encyclical's mention of Foucauld directly follows a lengthy description of another example of Christian-Muslim dialogue: Pope Francis and Grand Imam Ahmad al-Tayyeb of Al-Azhar.

Charles de Foucauld was a hermit, manual laborer, lover of the poor, friend to Muslims, and brother of all. He will soon be a saint. In a 1959 *Catholic Worker* newspaper article about him, Dorothy Day linked his vocation to Christ's, the one whose footsteps he sought to follow when he first moved to Nazareth and then to Algeria. Day's final reflection on Foucauld is thus a good place for this article to end:

"How far one's vocation will take one, is always a mystery, and where one's vocation will take one. But I believe it to be true that the foundations are always in poverty, manual labor, and in seeming failure. It is the pattern of the Cross, and in the Cross is joy of spirit."¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁴ Day, "Retreat," 2, 7, 8.

REPORTS

FRATERNAL CONVERSATION AMONG MUSLIM & CHRISTIAN CO-PILGRIMS

The Islamic Studies Association (ISA) is an organization of Catholics in India who are engaged in promoting interfaith understanding and inter-community harmony between people of diverse faiths, especially between Christians and Muslims. Recently, the Bishop of Jammu and Kashmir Bishop Ivan Pereira, invited the Islamic Studies Association to conduct a programme, titled 'Interfaith Sharing', at Jammu. The programme was held on February 27, 2021, at the Ismailpur Pastoral Centre.

A three-member team from the Islamic Studies Association, consisting of Sister Sneha, Father Arun Mozhi SJ and I, went to Jammu for the programme. Sister Sneha and Fr. Arun are both advocates and are deeply committed to promoting interfaith relations and the welfare of the poor and marginalized, including Dalits, Tribals and minorities. And I, as a student and a teacher of Christian-Muslim relations, accompanied them for the programme.

The programme had three components. The first component, which was conducted by me, focused on interfaith relations, with special emphasis on Christian-Muslim relations. This was a conversation-based presentation.

The second component focused on the context in which we reflect on interfaith relations and share with each other our views and thoughts about the issue. The context for us is a pluralistic India, home to many religions, cultures and ways of life, and the Constitution of India and issues such as Constitutional values and human rights.

The third component was about listening to Muslims. We had invited 10 Muslim brothers and sisters from Rajouri. They are members of an organization called Centre for Peace and Spirituality, which is based in New Delhi. In this session, they spoke about their faith—

Islam—and about how the Holy Qur'an and the life of the Prophet of Islam had helped them to be better persons, better Muslims.

I do not want to give a report on the programme here. What I would like to do is to reflect on some of my experiences during the programme.

Some Reflections on the Experience

Jammu and Kashmir has a very special place in my life as a Jesuit, as a priest, and as a teacher and student of Christian-Muslim relations. Many years ago—in 1995—I was sent to teach in a Catholic-run school in Kashmir—St. Joseph's School, in Baramulla. At that time, I began to take an interest in the issue of Christian-Muslim relations. I began to read sources on Islam as well and also to meet Muslims.

I had just completed my studies in philosophy when I was sent to teach in the school. Fresh from the experience of having studied philosophy, I had been particularly impressed by the writings of a few philosophers. I learnt that I needed to be a servant of the people. My focus was to be not on dogmas but on where people stand, their existing realities. I needed to recognise on the reality of the people among whom I was sent—not with a mind filled with doctrines and dogmas, but with genuine concern for the people. I needed to know their joys and their sorrows.

So, I went as a servant of the Church to teach in the school in Baramulla, Kashmir, to serve the little children, the teaching community and the people of Baramulla. My first focus was to enter into their shoes, as it were, to feel their pain and their joy. I realized that in their joys and their sorrows there was a thirst for God, a deep desire for God, a deep opening towards God. I was amazed at this! To be there was to 'see God' through the eyes of my Muslim brothers and sisters. That was a great gain for me. And it compromised neither my faith nor the existing realities. I felt a deeper integration. It enabled me to become more of a follower

of Jesus. Being with my Muslim brothers and sisters helped me become a better Christian.

From my philosophical studies I had learnt the need to be not just an observer but also a participant. I felt that as a servant of the Church, serving the people in Baramulla, I should be a participant in their lives. As a participant in the lives of the students and teachers in the school, closely interacting with them, I recognized them as beautiful mysteries of God, mysteries to celebrate. That gave me another insight—that I am a brother to my Muslim brothers and sisters. I belong to a vast family of God, where all human beings, without any distinctions, are brothers and sisters.

So, some of the philosophers I had earlier read, my reading of the Bible and living with Muslim brothers and sisters in Kashmir, including the children in the school, gave me some very valuable insights, which are very precious for me as a Jesuit, serving the mission of God in the field of Christian-Muslim relations.

What is Interfaith Dialogue?

In my sharing with the participants in the programme at Jammu, I reflected on these experiences of mine, from the things I had learnt from interacting with Muslim brothers and sisters. Then, we talked about interfaith dialogue.

Often, people think that interfaith dialogue is something only ‘experts’ do or can do. I had to challenge that notion. Interfaith dialogue is simply the dialogue of life. The respect and esteem that we show to others is the starting point for dialogue—respecting them as fellow human beings, respecting their religious convictions, respecting their ways of life, respecting their thirst for peace and justice, their thirst for harmony, their thirst for God in their life.

We began with that. We talked about dialogue as conversation, conversation between people holding significantly different views on some things. I emphasized that the differences are significant. I also spoke about how we look at other through our own lenses and interpret them accordingly—and so, we need to practice caution.

Another point that I emphasized was that interfaith dialogue is not polemics or debate or apologetics. I drew from examples from the history of Christian-Muslim relations to show how polemics generate heat but not light, how debates end without any mutual learning, how apologetics is a one-way journey, where there is no co-pilgrim.

I also shared about how interfaith dialogue is a certain way of thinking, seeing and reflecting on reality. I reflected on how important it is for us to try to put ourselves in other people's shoes, as it were. I stressed that dialogue needs open-mindedness to appreciate differences and plurality—not simply tolerating differences, which is not a virtue at all. Going beyond mere tolerance, we need to appreciate religious differences and religious plurality.

I also emphasized that we must shed exclusiveness and feelings of superiority. Sometimes, we behave like triumphalists, as if we have a monopoly over truth. We need to shed that attitude.

God is a mystery. For Christians, Jesus is very important for us in our hope for God-experience. Similarly, other faith communities have their own understanding of God-experience. We need to see how we can mutually enrich one another and continue to go towards God, towards God as a mystery. We cannot comprehend God, but we can have experiences of God. When people from different religious backgrounds share our experiences of God with one another, we feel and experience that God is at the heart of human life. So, there is no exclusivism, no supremacism, no triumphalism—all of which should be shed.

I spoke about how the primary purpose of interfaith dialogue is to learn and experience mutual enrichment. Here, I spoke about the prejudice that many of us have about others. I spoke about some different types of ignorance that lead to such prejudice, drawing on my experience of teaching students in different places, in India and elsewhere. I have personally witnessed these types of ignorance about other faiths and their followers.

One sort of ignorance is simple ignorance. Some people have no idea about people of other faiths. They do not display any intentional prejudice. They are simple and humble people, and they acknowledge their ignorance of people of other faiths. They correct their lack of knowledge on receiving the correct information.

There is also blind ignorance of other faiths and their adherents, rooted in intellectual stubbornness. People who display this sort of ignorance are not necessarily malicious. They may simply display some close-minded conservatism. We need to relentlessly work with such people, to help them see the positive in others.

Then, there is also willful ignorance of the religious ‘other’. People with this sort of mentality simply refuse to know. They just avoid knowing. They deliberately shun any good evidence that is contrary to what they want to believe about the other. This ideological ignorance is a real challenge to engage with.

I also shared about how by learning about other religions and their followers we can grow in wisdom and faith. By opening up to Muslims, a Christian can become a better follower of Christ. In other words, one can grow in one’s own faith by interacting with people of other faiths. I learnt, I explained, that when I begin to interact closely and positively with people of other faiths, when I begin to stand with them in their desire for God, I begin to review my own ways of thinking about many things in the light of my new learnings about the other, and in that way I can become a better follower of Jesus. Our faith is not compromised through this interaction. Rather, it is deepened and becomes more open. I said that we take roots and we also take wings!

Sharing and Witnessing

We had invited our Muslim friends for lunch. The chairs were arranged in such a way that Christians and Muslims sat together. We shared lovely conversations over the meal.

After lunch, the next session began—the third component. I had requested our Muslim brothers to give more of a faith-sharing—not about the rules and regulations or theoretical part of their faith, but, rather, more about how their life is shaped by the Holy Qur'an and the life of the Prophet of Islam. A young lady also spoke, very well, with confidence, on women in Islam. Senior members of the Centre for Peace and Spirituality beautifully shared about how they had changed in their life journey, and how the words of the Holy Qur'an and the life of the Prophet had helped them to live in peace. In this way, the CPS members gave witness to their faith.

When people from different faiths give witness to their respective faiths together, we can grow in our recognition of our common brotherhood and sisterhood. This one-day programme provided some precious opportunities for that. Personally, it was another transformative experience for me of understanding God's call for all of us to know one another, appreciate one another, and love one another, for God loves each one of us.

Joseph Victor Edwin SJ

ISLAMIC STUDIES ASSOCIATION CELEBRATES HUMAN FRATERNITY DAY

The Islamic Studies Association has celebrated the “International Day of Human Fraternity” through a webinar.

Craig Considine, a professor at the Department of Sociology in Rice University of the United States was the speaker for the February 4 program on “The Humanity of Prophet Muhammad.”

Considine pointed out that the media have been feeding people around the world a steady diet of Islamophobia since the tragic events of September 11, 2001. This Islamophobic propaganda insists that Islam is incompatible with the western values that are founded on Judeo-Christian world view. Therefore, the Muslim ‘other’ is a threat to Judeo-Christian way of life.

The professor also contends that critical scholarship must counteract this view and turn back the tide of Islamophobia. Through his scholarship, Considine reclaims the view that there is in fact a Judeo-Christian-Muslim theological tradition. By analyzing Prophet Muhammad’s life through the lens of history and sociology, he presented Prophet Muhammad as an egalitarian and an advocate of religious pluralism. Prophet Muhammad was deeply committed to the creation of just societies devoid of racism and ethnocentrism, he added.

Abdur Raheem Kidwai, professor of English and director of the UGC Human Resource Development Centre at Aligarh Muslim University, while introducing Considine, noted that the views of the American professor provide an antidote to Islamophobia.

The Islamic Studies Association was founded in 1979 by a group of scholars and their friends in the framework of Delhi’s

Vidyajyoti College of Theology. Since then the association has been at the service of Christian-Muslim relations in the Indian Subcontinent.

Its members teach Islam and interreligious dialogue in a number of universities and academic institutes throughout India. One major ISA publication was the handbook “The Muslims of India: Beliefs and Practices,” edited by late Jesuit Father Paul Jackson. The book focuses on the Indian Muslims by giving the general Islamic background needed for others to understand them better.

The quarterly journal “Salaam” is another important service ISA has been rendering to promote Christian-Muslim relations in the context of pluralistic India for the last 40 years uninterruptedly.

Joseph Victor Edwin SJ

STATEMENT OF INDIAN THEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION (ITA) IN SOLIDARITY WITH THE FARMERS' STRUGGLE FOR JUSTICE

Tens of thousands of farmers have gathered at the outskirts of Delhi from November 26 last year protesting against the three contentious farm laws: The Farmers (Empowerment & Protection) Agreement of Price Assurance and Farm Services Bill, The Essential Commodities Act (Amendment) Bill and the Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Bill. All these three bills have made Indian farmers, most of them own less than one acre even more vulnerable by giving the levers of power to the big agri-business companies.

The newly imposed farm laws are a blatant attack on the Indian democracy by the present federal government run by Shri Narendra Modi. The corporate-friendly federal government neither had any consultations with the many farmer unions across India nor with the opposition parties in the Parliament. The central government unabashedly, manipulating its majority in the lower house of the Parliament executed the bills. Further, by trespassing into a state subject, agriculture, this government has weakened the federal structure of the Indian Union.

Farmers camped at the protest sites while enduring the biting cold, explain how these controversial farm laws while exploiting them, will benefit the Corporates to make huge profits at the expense of their sweat and blood. "The farm laws will impoverish us further and we will lose our lands," they say. "We demand that these laws are repealed. Any postponement like 'freezing the laws for some months' is a deliberate attempt to weaken our movement," affirm farmers in one voice.

Farmers stress that they have no legal protection vis-à-vis the big agro-business companies they are pitted against, if disputes arise. "Is it possible for a marginal farmer to fight the multinationals?" ask farmers. In addition, the government has given a free hand for

these big companies to hoard food stuff and make huge profits. This step will push millions of poor people to abject poverty. More than seventy elderly farmers have died unable to withstand the severe cold wave. The government has turned a blind eye on the suffering of the farmers and has turned stone deaf to their cries for justice.

‘Farm laws’ are yet another deliberate attempt to weaken the Indian democracy. The right- wing Hindutva groups’ dream of establishing an ethnic Hindu State would be possible only by replacing the sovereign, secular, democratic, socialist republic established by Constitution of India. Demonetization, the abolition of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, and enactment of Citizenship (Amendment Act) that discriminates people against one another in terms of religion are the other significant moves to destroy the Constitutional democracy of India.

It is in this context, one finds the determination and courage of farmers in the face of brutal power of the government remarkable. They are fearless to speak the truth in the corridors of power. Their patience and perseverance are outstanding. It is inspiring to see how thousands are fed in the camps by ‘langar’ (community kitchen) and cleanliness and order maintained everywhere.

In the protest sites one witnesses to the cry of the vulnerable. “When they cry out to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate (Exodus 22: 27). God listens to the cry of the oppressed and stands with them in their struggle for justice. The farmers are not seeking charity from the government or from their cronies. They demand their rights. We hope that the farmers who feed the nation will succeed in their struggle for justice. We believe that God who stands with the vulnerable will lead them to victory.

We the members of Indian Theological Association firmly support the cause of the farmers and all those who strive relentlessly for peace founded on justice. We demand that the government listens to the voice of the poor and repeals the controversial laws.

On behalf of Indian Theological Association,

Dr. Vincent Kundukulam, President, ITA

Dr. Kochurani Abraham, Vice President, ITA

Dr. Raj Irudaya SJ, Secretary, ITA

Dr. Joy Pulikkan SDB, Treasurer, ITA

Dr. Jacob Parappally MSFS, Member, Ex. Committee, ITA

Dr. Davis Varayilan CMI, Member, Ex. Committee, ITA

Dr. P.T. Mathew SJ, Member, Ex. Committee, ITA

Dr. Victor Edwin SJ, Member, Ex. Committee, ITA.

A CONVERSATION WITH JOSE KAVI (EDITOR, MATTERS INDIA)

Jose Kavi

Matters India: How has the ISA reacted to the recent happenings in France and Austria? Are you disappointed and dejected? How do such direct attacks on Christians affect the Church's attempts to dialogue with Muslims?

Father Victor Edwin: Islamic Studies Association (ISA) strongly condemns the barbaric acts of violence in the name of religion recently in France and Austria. We are profoundly grieved at these acts of aggression that tend to destroy human fraternity and solidarity. The members of ISA express our grief to and solidarity with the families of the victims.

While denouncing the violence caused by some individuals in the name of religion, ISA also rejects the mind-set that pounces on the deficiencies of a few members of another group, magnifies them and completely ignores the special beauty and goodness of the vast majority of its members.

We oppose the publication of the offensive cartoons of Muhammad, the prophet of Islam. It hurts Muslims, Christians and all people of good will. The Catholic Church teaches us to respect Muslims, people of all faiths, including those who do not follow any faith traditions.

Pope Francis in his recent encyclical "Fratelli Tutti" affirmed that religions must be at the service of fraternity in our world. Violence has no place in religious convictions but only in its deformities. In these difficult times, following the teachings of Pope Francis, we resolve to work for peace – underpinned by truth, justice and mercy – that aims at forming a society founded on reconciliation and forgiveness. There is no room for dejection, but full of hope in challenging times.

ISA is more than 40 years old. What are its achievements over the past four decades? Has the association managed to bring Christians and Muslims in India closer? What are the challenges still remaining?

Vatican II has made this profound affirmation about Muslims: “Together with us they adore the One and Merciful God.” This statement has weighty theological implications for the pastoral practice of the Church. For us Christians, this one God has revealed His nature as Love in Jesus Christ in a defining way and Muslims believe that this one God revealed His Will in the Holy Qur’an, in a defining way. Hence, we worship one God, albeit in different ways. We must approach one another as brothers and sisters.

Further, in *Nostra Aetate*, the Church declares her esteem for Muslims, since “they adore one God.” Recognising the quarrels and hostilities that Christians and Muslim had over the centuries, the Church invites Christians to “forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom”.

Inspired by the teaching of the Church, ISA understands that her mission is to serve the Church by assisting in the formation of Christian men and women, who are preparing for different ministries in the Church, helping them enter into ‘dialogue’ with people of other faiths, humbly and respectfully.

The members of ISA offer courses on Islam, Christian-Muslim dialogue and mystical dimensions of Islam in several seminaries and ecclesiastical institutes in India for the last four decades. On a more popular level, during the bi-annual conventions, ISA has brought Muslims and Christians ‘face to face’ to speak about their faith and the challenges they face living out their faith. On those occasions, ISA has arranged ‘exposure program’ for Christians to visit Muslim institutions and religious places. The members of ISA consider that their personal vocation is to do something beautiful

for God together with our Muslim brothers and sisters, without excluding anyone, in the service of our great nation.

Challenges are many. The first challenge is to confront the ‘layers upon layers’ of prejudice against Islam and Muslims that I found among fellow Christians. These prejudices have grown from certain interpretations of historical memories of certain groups or have been largely drawn uncritically from the distorted images of Islam and Muslims in the mainstream media.

These prejudices are underpinned by ignorance that is often expressed through cynical comments on Muslims, their morality and way of life. Often many Christians make comparisons of the ideals of Christianity with the realities of Islamic world, and judge Muslims negatively.

Overcoming ignorance is no easy task. Some Christians display ignorance that could be termed as ‘simple ignorance.’ They are simply ignorant of the faith and praxis of the ‘religious other.’ They do not display any intentional prejudice. They acknowledge their ignorance and correct their perception on receiving right information.

The second type displays ‘blind ignorance’ born of intellectual stubbornness that effectively prevents ‘coming to know the other’. Though not necessarily malicious, this blindness draws from close-minded conservatism. Sustained educational efforts, especially personal experience of the ‘positive other’, bring about desirable changes.

The third type of ignorance, ‘culpable ignorance,’ is sustained by refusal to know, avoidance of the challenge of cognitive change, and the reinforcement of a prejudicial perspective by deliberately shunning any evidence to the contrary. This is an ideologically driven ignorance.

Pastoral centers in dioceses must consider programs to educate Christians in ‘interfaith literacy.’ Interfaith literacy must include

some inputs on the content of the faith of our neighbors as well as exposure programs to the faith life of our neighbors by meeting them in their places of worship or at their institutions. I have realized meeting Muslims and having conversations with them is the real game changer. I am convinced that there is no alternative to personal experience. If the heart is touched and moved, one learns to recognize the preciousness of the ‘religious other’.

What is the relation between Muslims and Christians in India? Are they suspicious of each other?

Christian-Muslim relations in India have a long and complex history that touches upon commercial relations to religious relations. At times the relationship between them was harmonious and at other times turbulent. The relationship was also often encumbered by the polemics of the past. However, this scene is changing with a new spirit in Christian-Muslim relations in the 20th century onwards, especially after the Vatican Council, as shown in the activities of ISA.

As a Christian I have been meeting Muslims in their homes, mosques, madrasas, and Sufi shrines. They are always kind, generous and hospitable. Only once in my 25 years of such engagement with Muslims I experienced an unpleasant event in a Muslim institution.

In my conversations, I have observed that Islam presents a definite teaching on the nature of Christianity as part of its doctrine. They believe that God’s revelation given to Jesus in the ‘gospel’ has been corrupted in Christianity. They also hold that Christian faith mysteries such as the Trinity, divinity of Christ, incarnation and redemption are not only deviations from the preaching of Christ but also betrayal of simplicity of faith in one God. Muslims feel Christians should rid themselves of their mistaken, twisted understanding of Christian message and return to the pure Gospel received from God and preached by Christ.

They are sincere in communicating their understanding of Christianity to their Christian friends. However, in such conversations, the problematic is that while sharing the same

religious matrix as children of Abraham, Muslims contest the Christian faith tradition through the Qur'anic lens. Similarly, on the Christian side we notice quite often an unwillingness to open one's heart and mind to the millennial conversation (that goes on between Semitic religious such as Jewish faith, Christianity and Islam), but often rely on media and hearsay in forming opinion about Muslims. As estranged neighbors, both claim that their faith is superior to the faith of the other.

Christians and Muslims must get rid of such mindset and enter into mutually fruitful conversation that leads to the recognition of their shared responsibility towards healing the wounded humanity and the mother earth. Muslim and Christians must listen to one another which will guide them to speak to one another as brothers and sisters; not speak at one another as enemies.

The Catholic Church, especially the Syro-Malabar Church, has been accusing Muslims of indulging in “love jihad” where Muslim men trap Christian girls with offer of friendship and love and then force them to convert to Islam? Even the Hindu radical groups have made this allegation. What has been your experience? Have you come across such cases? If not, has ISA done anything to make the Church change its views?

I think we must be careful not to twist the meaning of the word ‘jihad’. Jihad is to strive in the path of God. It is to bend one's will to the will of God. Muslim scholars explain that the greater jihad is launched against one's own lust and greed that takes one away from God. It is a spiritual effort to live in peace with God and one's neighbor.

There are individuals and groups that indulge in violence and call it Jihad. They do get theological support from sources within Islam. This is dangerous and it is pointed out by many Christian scholars who have studied Islam in depth. However, this theological support does not go uncontested by many Islamic scholars. Hence, Christians must resist the temptation of judging Islam as medieval religion revealing more fault lines in its failure to face modernity.

I too have heard of some cases of Christian girls contracting marriage with Muslim boys whom they met online. Though we respect their decision about their life, we must alert them to the dangers of making life-decisions ‘online.’ Christian parents must remain a good model for their children in discerning God’s ways in their personal and family lives.

It is difficult to easily subscribe to the accusation that Muslim men engage in trapping Christian girls for marriage and then convert them into Islam as an undercurrent ‘Love Jihad’ plan. That needs to be checked and proved beyond doubt with clear instances. On another count, I am for both Muslim and Christian youth to fully understand their religious and cultural insights and practices.

While respecting the religions of each other, certain practices may invite tension and trouble and that needs to be fully understood by the boys and girls of both religions. Any misunderstanding might lead to tensions and pressures in their married life, in terms of baptism of the children born to them, easy way of announcing and getting divorced, the practice of worship pattern and performing rituals etc. Parents and religious leaders should play an advisory role to make the youth understand that quick and immature decisions lead to tensions not only in their own personal lives but also between the two religions.

Moreover, we must remember that the Catholic Church urges her children to engage with people of other faiths, as co-pilgrims in the spirit of the teachings of the Vatican II. It is possible that some members of the churches and even some church leaders in India have not fully imbued the spirit of Vatican II. They neglect the teaching of the Council and the successive popes. We must remember how the saintly Pope John Paul II was greatly appreciated by Muslims around the world as he reached out to them in the spirit of *Nostra Aetate* and built lasting friendships with them. Pope Francis in his pastoral outreach is building bridges between Christians and Muslims through fruitful dialogue. We must not resist the Spirit that blows where it wills.

SALAAM

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**If God is the God of life – for so he is –
then it is wrong for us to kill our brothers
and sisters in his Name.**

**If God is the God of peace –
for so he is – then it is wrong for us to wage
war in his Name.**

**If God is the God of love – for so he is–
then it is wrong for us to hate our brothers
and sisters.**

Pope Francis