

NEWS NOTES

Little Sisters of Jesus



Saint Charles de Foucauld

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Cover photo: Saint Charles de Foucauld

SAINT CHARLES DE FOUCAULD

Yes, this past year, the Church officially canonized him!

We, of course, are more used to speaking of him familiarly, and calling him “Brother Charles.” Indeed, the most beautiful title one could give another, the title to which every human person has a right because it was bestowed on him or her by Jesus himself, is precisely “my brother,” “my sister.”

Leading up to the canonization, the Archbishop of Marseilles, France, preached about Br. Charles:

“Charles de Foucauld was a *good* man. If you look at the photos taken of him throughout his life, you see his face shining with this goodness, increasingly so as his life became more stripped-down and surrendered into God’s hands.

“I have been touched by his constant availability to God. He let God do whatever He wanted with his life, even if he himself didn’t understand why none of his plans ever worked out: not to evangelize Morocco, not to become a Trappist, not to found a new religious community.

“Sure, he understood that God wanted him to be satisfied with clearing a path so that others could plant later. But he was thinking only in terms of announcing the Gospel to the people of the Sahara. He had no idea God was working through him to prepare a gift for the entire Church.”

Our latest edition of News Notes contains more than the usual amount of writing about Charles himself, eyewitness accounts, and sharing from little sisters about how he touched their lives. It is to him that all of us owe the inspiration for what we live today, and the communities in which we try to be sisters to all people, wherever in the world we find ourselves.

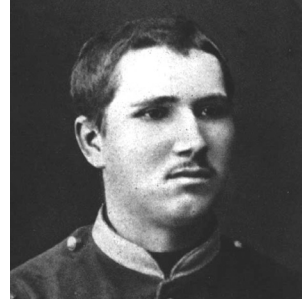
Saint Charles de Foucauld dreamed of groups and networks, religious and lay, which would “proclaim the Gospel by their lives,” and prayerfully live his motto, “Jesus-Love.” May we, who still prefer to call him *Brother Charles*, be the fulfillment of his dreams!

Gratefully,
Your Little Sisters of Jesus

Most News Notes readers probably know the basic outline of the life of Charles de Foucauld. But for those who are meeting him for the first time in the year of his canonization, we share here a brief outline:

On September 15, 1858, Charles de Foucauld was born in Strasbourg into a family of old French nobility. Orphaned at a young age, he and his sister Marie were entrusted to their grandfather's care. A bright child, with an anxious disposition, he lost his childhood faith during his high school years. *"Around 15 or 16 years of age, no trace of faith remained in me. I doubted everything,"* he later wrote in a letter to a friend with whom he shared his story.

At 18 he embarked on a military career, though he had no real convictions about it. Life in the barracks in North Africa¹ bored him, but when he was summoned to actual combat he suddenly proved himself a real soldier and a good officer. Difficulty seemed to bring out the best in him.



He decided to leave the army and undertake a risky solo exploration of Morocco (1883-1884). He was enchanted by the landscapes, but it was the inhabitants' faith that would leave a lasting mark. *"The sight of these people living in the continual presence of God gave me a glimpse into something greater and truer than earthly occupations."* Back in France to publish a book about his explorations, he found peace only while sitting at the back of churches repeating, *"My God, if you exist, grant that I might come to know you."*

When he was 28, his wish would be granted. Under his cousin Marie de Bondy's discreet guidance, he was directed to a well-known Paris priest named Fr. Henri Huvelin. Rather than offering him religious instructions, the latter invited him to conversion. God wasn't an intellectual notion he needed to grasp, but a living Person he needed to meet. *"He made me get down on my knees and make my confession."* Charles encountered God in the gift of His mercy. An indescribable joy took hold of him. Love had sought him out and found him.

He would later declare that *"From the moment I knew God existed, I was aware that I could not do otherwise than to live for God alone."* But in fact he needed a long time to find his vocation. A pilgrimage to the Holy Land led him to discover God in the poor man of Nazareth, *"the one,"* he

1 That is, Algeria, at that time a colony of France.

wrote, “*who took the last place so utterly that no one was ever able to wrest it from him.*” It was a shock, and a calling.

He became a Trappist monk in 1890, but after seven years had to admit that he could not find there the life of Nazareth he was searching for. “*The rich see us as being poor, but we’re not as poor as our Lord was.*” He left the monastery and returned to Nazareth, where he lived for three years as a hermit and servant in a convent of Poor Clare nuns. But long hours spent in meditation before the Blessed Sacrament spurred him on again.

“*The same mouth that said ‘This is my body,’ said ‘Whatever you do to the least of my brothers or sisters, you do to me,’*” he wrote in his meditations. The faces of people he had met during his exploration of Morocco came to him. His dream became to return there, bringing Jesus in the Eucharist, as Mary had carried Jesus invisibly present within her into Elizabeth’s house.

Large wall hanging of the Visitation painted by Br. Charles

But in order to do that, he would need to be a priest. He had always regarded priesthood as contrary to his calling, since it involved moving upwards socially. But the Poor Clare superior convinced him otherwise.

He was ordained in 1901 and given permission to go to Algeria. He settled in Beni-Abbès, an oasis relatively close to the Moroccan border. He wished to live there as a “little brother,” witnessing to God’s love not so much by his words (one could not actively preach Christianity in a Muslim country) but by his whole life. Doing this would not be easy on the front lines of a colonial empire. The wish to be a “universal brother” meant being brother to both occupied and occupier.



While living in Beni-Abbès he redeemed a few enslaved children², and

² France had officially abolished slavery in its colonies but not enforced the

lived with a couple of them. And he noted, *“The local people are starting to call my house ‘the fraternity,’ and that gives me joy.”*

Three years later he was invited to take part in a convoy headed to the Hoggar region of the southern Sahara with the intention of fostering good relations with the Tuareg tribes. In 1905 he settled among the Tuareg in a tiny, isolated village called Tamanrasset. He immediately began studying their language, visiting campsites where he listened to, transcribed, and translated their songs, poems, and proverbs. This would be the basis for work on a dictionary and grammar that would occupy the rest of his life.



View of the desert from the plateau of Tamanrasset. (Photo: LSSH)

During a prolonged drought in 1907, he fell sick with scurvy. *“The Tuareg searched for goats within a 4-km radius to get me a bit of milk.”* This moment helped him discover a new dimension of living Nazareth—it wasn’t just about giving, but also about being able to receive.

Even though Br. Charles came among the Tuareg with the ardent desire of bringing them Jesus present in the Blessed Sacrament, he had to live a long time without the Eucharist—it was against Church law to celebrate Mass or reserve the Eucharist without the presence of another Christian. Toward the end he did receive special permission, but for much of his time there, the only Eucharistic presence his *“Muslim parishioners”* would have was the offering of his own life.

Bitterly disappointed with the exploitative nature of the French occupying presence in Algeria, Br. Charles made three trips to France to establish a confraternity that would awaken his compatriots to the destitution

ban. Islam does not condemn slavery, as it teaches the imitation of Muhammad, who himself owned enslaved people.

of the native inhabitants of their colonies. But World War I put a halt to his plans. The war spilled into hostilities between local Saharan tribes, and Br. Charles was killed during a raid on the evening of Dec. 1, 1916.

A few days later the Blessed Sacrament was found in the sand, not far from the place the local villagers had buried him. *“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains a single grain. But if it dies, it yields much fruit.”* Br. Charles had meditated on this verse from the Gospel of John. He was beatified in 2005 and canonized on May 15 of this year. He remains, above all, a “brother.”

OBSERVATIONS FROM OUTSIDERS

Holiness is an interaction between divine inspiration and individual persons in all their uniqueness. To observers, saints can appear at once admirable and bizarre. Two men who personally met Charles in the desert recounted a little of what they remembered:

from the Soldier

Around the beginning of the last century, a veteran of 41 campaigns in the French Foreign Legion was asked by the Little Sisters of the Poor, in whose nursing home he was then a resident, to write down some of his memories³:

◇ Ah yes, Charles de Foucauld! I knew him in the Sahara. I often delivered food supplies to him. He was so thin! He was a former officer, but for religious reasons, he had become a sort of monk. He was like a saint...

◇ It was in 1903. There was a convoy made of two companies of Legionnaires, two pieces of mountain artillery, and Algerian cavalry and light infantry, all under the command of General Ottry. We were coming from Figuig, and after marching for around 10 days we arrived in Beni-Abbès. We had 150 camels loaded with foodstuffs for all the oasis posts in that part of the desert.

We were approaching Beni-Abbès when suddenly out came a European—a skeleton, really—accompanied by a little black boy. Everyone

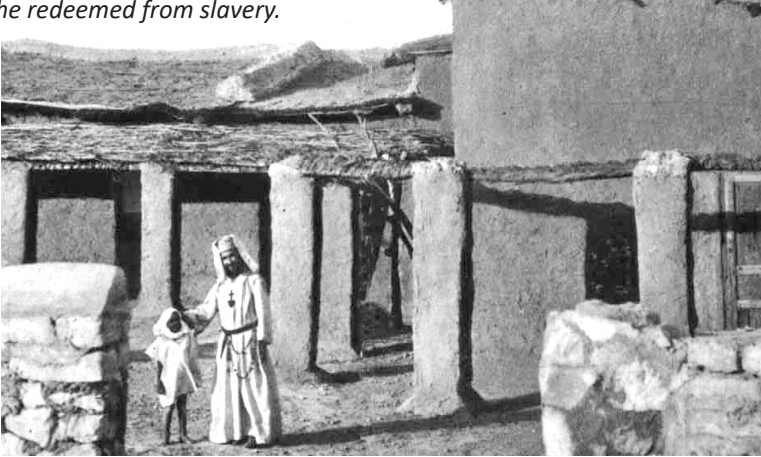
³ Text originally appeared in the “Bulletin des Petites Soeurs des Pauvres,” 1950, n.49

was surprised to meet a white man here, one so thin and pale we had pity on him. Soon enough, the word went around, “That’s the Frenchman, the missionary, Charles de Foucauld!”

◇ He had built a chapel in that place, with no tools other than a trowel made from a camel bone⁴. To decorate it he had painted Our Lord on a cloth, and its beauty was enhanced by the rays of the sun.

There was never a shortage of water in the oasis, as it had a gushing spring. He grew some vegetables in a garden. But he lived almost entirely on dates. Constantly by his side was a little black child of 10 or 12 years, who had taught him the local language.

In Beni-Abbès (1903) with Abd Jesu whom he redeemed from slavery.



As for ourselves [legionnaires] personally, all each of us had were two liters of water and a tin of flour for making bread, which we cooked in the sun: we’d mix the flour with salt and water, put our little loaf in a hole in the sand, and half an hour later, it would be baked.

As ever, Providence provided and we never lacked for necessities. Since we had some of the provisions we were transporting left over, we were able to leave the missionary some rice, coffee, sugar, flour, and barley. Myself, I gave him my last bit of food—half a tin of flour—since he looked like he needed it so badly! In addition, we took up a collection among the troops; it wasn’t much, but still, it was helpful to him.

◇ On the second day Charles de Foucauld built an altar in front of his hut, with the help of some local people; it was made of old boxes and covered with palm leaves. All the men who had stumps of candles donated

⁴ In fact, the French military had helped him considerably.

them to burn on and around the altar. Charles de Foucauld said Mass for all the men and the local people present. Afterwards the men sang the Te Deum.⁵ The next day we took our leave to return to our posts. We said good-bye to the missionary, who stayed in Beni-Abbès to work in the Lord's vineyard and spread the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ.

from the Scientist

E.F. Gautier was a French geographer (1864-1940) who specialized in the study of Algeria and the Sahara. He spent some weeks with Br. Charles and wrote a chapter about the experience in his 1920 book "L'Algérie et la métropole." A few excerpts⁶:

◇ Our Foucauld was a viscount, although he did not look like one. He was in touch with his family back in France, and held them in affection. It happened that on a return trip from the Sahara I was entrusted by him with a message for the Countess of F., his "second mother." She lived in Paris in a beautiful residence in a very chic district. In this Parisian setting she spoke of the hermit with affectionate irritation: "What is he doing there? Why is he leading this absurd life? No, it doesn't make any sense!" It is not surprising there would be mutual incomprehension between a distant hermit and his Parisian family...

◇ Foucauld had begun life as a cavalry officer. This was not obvious in the hermit, though it is said that in a moment of lightheartedness he was seen jumping a horse over obstacles, in his monk's robe, sandals in the stirrups. It probably happened once in twenty years... Muscles have a long memory, and they still knew how to do it...



◇ Fr. de Foucauld and I followed a small column of soldiers traveling by camel in 1905. For two months, twice a day, we ate together; almost all my memories of him come from this time. One day Foucauld, inno-

⁵ Ancient Latin hymn of praise sung on occasions of public rejoicing.

⁶ Text in the public domain.

cently and with his usual gaiety, told of a recurring nightmare: "I see myself in my little officer's room, putting on my dolman⁷. An anguish wakes me up with a start. Thank you, my God, it was only a dream!" This dolman of his nightmares is one of those professional garments that create a certain physical aura. An officer out of uniform is easily recognized. In Fr. de Foucauld it was completely gone, nothing in his manner betrayed the soldier. He was a monk from head to toe...

In this expedition we travelled with Mr. E., a high-level civil servant with the Postal and Telegraph Department whose mission was to study the possibility of a trans-Saharan telegraph. He was bothered by the title "Father" which was of current use when one addressed Fr. de Foucauld. One day, Mr. E., asked, "How should one address you?" and Foucauld replied, "Please call me Brother Charles." He showed his good toothless smile in the midst of a very poorly trimmed beard.



◇ There was one aspect of the former man that Br. Charles could not make disappear. He had been an intellectual, and he remained so till the end, with his hesitant speech and natural curiosity. Foucauld's book remains the primary source of information [about Morocco]. It is very well written, precise, well-documented, clear.

Berbers⁸ have been a considerable people who held a place throughout twenty centuries of history. They have never had a written literature, hardly a written word. But they have a language, and have remained faithful to it for two millenia. It is a decaying language, in fragments, one of the most representative probably being the Hoggar dialect. It is spoken in the heart of the Sahara, far from all influences. But it found a man who lived ten years in the Hoggar [i.e., Br. Charles], with the almost unique concern of listening to this language, of noting its words and forms, of writing its

7 Fancy fitted jacket of the officer's class.

8 Indigenous northern African peoples. The Tuareg are a large Berber ethnic group.

folklore. It is a huge work. It supposes in its author the sacred fire without which nothing is achieved, the secular craving to understand.

◇ Foucauld had travelled through unknown Morocco disguised as a Jew⁹; and we know the abjection to which the Moroccan Jew is still subject in the ghetto where he must live. Foucauld put himself under the protection of public contempt. It is ingenious, and it has produced remarkable results. To choose such a way, it was necessary to have had the taste for humility, a feeling which foreshadowed the monk.

These were long months of Jewish and Muslim life, of intimate contact with these religions which take one's whole soul. Foucauld came out of it permeated with Islamic feeling. It is said that he considered a conversion to Islam.¹⁰ The priest who kept Foucauld in Christianity is not unknown, though he is a forgotten man. It was Fr. Huvelin who turned Foucauld around and made him a monk; he must have been a formidable man.

◇ From [Br. Charles'] appearance, it was not obvious that he was a monk rather than a marabout¹¹. His cotton robe could have been a gandoura; he wore something similar to a fez on his head. Some natives were mistaken. One lends this exclamation to Moussa-Ag-Amastane, chief of the Hoggar Tuareg: "What are you doing, marabout, you are a Christian! Your austerities will be of no use to you in the next world!"¹² Foucauld never tried to clear up the ambiguity.

We, his infidel companions, also experienced his discretion. Throughout the long weeks of traveling together, Fr. de Foucauld surely said Mass every day, with no other witness than Paul.¹³ We did not even know he was saying Mass. But at the moment when the tents were being taken down for departure, we glimpsed Foucauld very meticulously wrapping the good Lord in a white cloth. Throughout all those weeks of eating together, the conversation never became churchy, nor did he ever make the least effort to convert us.

◇ Fr. de Foucauld leaves those of us who knew him in the Sahara an

9 It was forbidden, and thus extremely dangerous, for Christians to travel in Morocco.

10 In fact, he wrote "Islam pleased me with its simplicity...but I could clearly see that it had no divine foundation, and that the truth was not there." (to Henri de Castries, 1901)

11 Muslim holy man. The clothing described here would have been worn by such a person.

12 Islam holds that non-Muslims cannot enter paradise in the next life.

13 A former slave, one of three local persons Br. Charles baptized.

abundance of charming memories. I only knew the ‘monastery’ of Beni-Abbès. It was two or three small adobe houses. I remember having almost committed a sacrilege: I was going to sit on a wooden box when the Father warned me just in time that it was the altar.

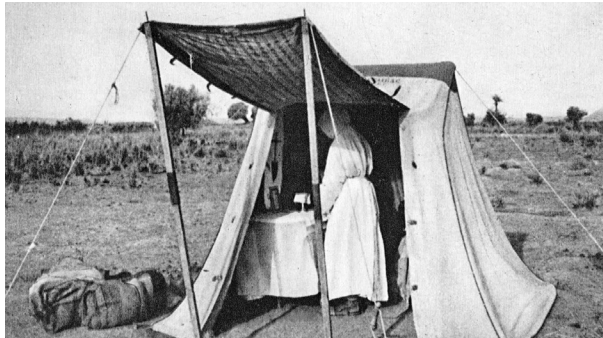
I still have a vivid memory of the first casual conversation I had the honor of having with him. It was during a night trek and I was dozing off on my camel. Fr. de Foucauld, my neighbor, was walking on foot beside the camel, out of mortification, I imagine. I was awakened by his voice saying, “How beautiful!” And it was. Under a bright moon we were crossing the jagged old volcano of In-Ziza.

The conversation, in search of memories we might have in common, strayed to the University of Nancy. [*Foucauld inquired of professors and academics he had known who had become celebrities.*] About another star, still current, Foucauld had read the revues. “How goes it with Sarah Bernhardt?”¹⁴

◇ In 1906, Foucauld, thin and with black hair, looked surprisingly young for his age. Ten years later he was extremely worn out. It is said that for long periods he forgot to eat.

He lived among the Tuareg, doing what good was in his power to do... I suppose a tomb will be built for Foucauld, in the local style [i.e., a domed “koubba”]. This tomb will prolong the influence of the man. The miracles will begin. Do we know what will crystallize around this koubba? The saints are particularly dangerous after their death.

During the journeys through the desert Br. Charles would rise early to say Mass in a small chapel tent.



◇ There was not just respect around Foucauld during his lifetime. It happened that people said, “He’s a madman.” But he was very happy living this way. He had pushed himself to his limit, he was completely fulfilled; he was an absurdly complete human being. Maybe that was the secret of his happiness. His eyes shone with calm and silent joy.

14 French actress (1862-1923) who had enjoyed sensational success.

FINDING ONE'S PLACE

“Jesus went down with his parents to Nazareth, and lived under their authority.” (Lk4:51) Brother Charles knew from the moment he set foot in Nazareth, on a pilgrimage at the beginning of his re-discovered Christian life, that he wanted his own life to express the mystery of the “going down” of God, the God who spent thirty years in obscurity in a small, out of the way village. But it took him many years to figure out just what that meant for him concretely. The little sisters of Kabarondo, Rwanda, welcome young women who express interest in the Little Sisters, in order to help them discern if our life is the best way for them to follow Jesus:

Taking care of women at this very first step in the community requires a lot of attention and listening, as well as personal accompaniment in order to discern what the true motives are of each one who expresses an interest in, and desire for, our vocation.

It is very interesting to hear what brings each of them to choose the Little Sisters, out of all the Congregations here. Some of the motivations: “I chose the Little Sisters because I love adoration of the Blessed Sacrament.” “I like the simplicity, and the respect for each person that I find in the community.” Or, “the simple kinds of jobs you do, like the neighbors.” Or “How you welcome and live with everyone without making distinctions,” and “the desire for unity.”

Since manual work is part of our life, we make candles, rosaries, and little biscuits, and we grow vegetables in our garden. This work sustains us, pays for our ordinary living expenses, and helps us feel closer to Jesus, the workman at Nazareth, and to our neighbors who also seek out some means of supporting themselves.

The people of our



neighborhood feel at ease with us. Our neighbor Bukuru stops by three times during the day to say, “I just want to say hi and bye, I’m on my way home.”

Please pray for the young women who come to us seeking their way.

LOVE TAKES TIME

Not everyone who sets out in the footsteps of Charles de Foucauld can relate to every aspect of his person or writings. But with time and life experience, we may find ourselves on common ground. Lsr Anny Myriam from Switzerland tells how that happened for her:

Hello!

I am not French. That’s probably why I had never heard of Charles de Foucauld before I entered the Little Sisters of Jesus 40 years ago.

I was a teenager when I had the experience of praying before Jesus on the cross, and being overcome by his love, love that went to such an extreme of total self-gift.

Like Br. Charles, I wanted to respond to such love, and began to seek out the best way to do it. Like him, I started by going to a monastery; I was attracted by contemplative life. Once while attending a camp for young people, I saw two little sisters of Jesus who came to speak to us about their life among carnival workers. When I heard they earned their living making and selling crêpes at carnival fairgrounds, I stopped listening; I wasn’t at all interested in such a thing. How could you pray in the middle of all the noise at a carnival?



Later I encountered other little sisters, and I was struck by the simplicity of their lifestyle. Most importantly, I discovered that they didn't just live on fairgrounds. So, I began to open my ears... and my heart!

When I entered the Little Sisters, I tried to read the meditations of Br. Charles. I found them... impossible! They came from another time, in a language that meant nothing to me. And frankly, what did he and I have in common? He was

- a son of an upper-crust family who inherited a fortune
- a skeptical teenager who lost his childhood faith
- a bored soldier who indulged his every desire for pleasure
- a brave explorer who risked his life and became famous
- a convert... and something of a fanatical one
- an ascetic, who fasted and desired martyrdom
- an impulsive, rather unstable person, who switched direction in life often
- a missionary hermit in the Sahara desert
- a solitary, independent person dreaming of an ideal community
- a Frenchman who supported his country's colonial policies
- a 19th century man who prayed in very formal language and had a devotion to "the Sacred Heart."

No, at first glance, Charles de Foucauld and I had nothing in common... It would take time for me to learn to know him, and to love him!

When I became a postulant [first stage of formation], I was sent to... the carnival workers! God's sense of humor! I discovered it's not, in fact, impossible to pray in the midst of the noise and music of the fairgrounds. With a certain distance now, I believe Charles de Foucauld opened up a new path in the Church. Before him, contemplative life was "reserved" for cloistered monks and nuns. Brother Charles showed that it can also be lived outside monastery walls.

He was a seeker, groping his way. After 7 years with the Trappists and 3 years in solitude in Nazareth, he decided to become a priest so he could go after "the sheep who have strayed the farthest." For him that would be Algeria, the nomads, the Tuareg. I didn't stay with the carnival workers. I am not a nomad. I didn't feel called to go to the ends of the earth. Like Br. Charles, though, I looked for the people who were "farthest away"... but right here, in Europe! One winter, I went every day to a soup kitchen for homeless people. I worked as a cleaning lady for a man with AIDS, who adopted me as his little sister. I spent some time with women in prison.

There were many faces inhabiting my prayer...

Charles de Foucauld went looking for the “farthest away” in the desert. My own desert was a big supermarket. I spent 27 years there. Always in noise, in music and advertisements on an endless loop. I was a cashier. Like Br. Charles I tried to patiently weave relationships, with co-workers and with customers.

With co-workers: I helped a lot of beginners find their way, giving them tips on how to survive especially stressful moments, or how to keep going when breaktime seemed to never come (it was forbidden to eat on the job, but who would see a little sweet hidden in one’s pocket?)

With customers: I learned to say “Thank you” in different languages, and the resulting smiles were a light that helped make the atmosphere more relaxed. Thanks to payment by “plastic” I also learned the names of the regulars: if I greeted them by name, I knew they’d come back to stand in line at my register. Some became friends. I remember one couple who invited me to a restaurant; and an elderly man I visited at the hospital two days before he died—we prayed together, and it was a sacred moment; and a young mother who showed me the ultrasound of her third child whom she was expecting. So many very human moments, in the spaces between life and death!

Charles de Foucauld fought against the injustice of slavery. I fought with the union for regular hours and fair wages. After enduring months of struggle and subtle threats, I succeeded. “But you are the exception,” the boss told me. Yet, the union fought on, and a year later all the workers received a minimum number of regular hours, and that in all the stores in the company’s chain. They took me off the cashier’s post, then, and put me on the fabric aisle. And a few years after that, I retired.

In all of it, Jesus was my faithful companion... And after so many years of trying to follow him, I still feel like I’m just beginning.

Br. Charles' clock

In my personal life, I often feel like I’m incapable of praying, of truly loving! But I want to continue trying. I love Br. Charles’ clock, on which he wrote, “It is time to love God. Jesus-Caritas.” It’s al-



ways time to love God. It's always time to love.

I'm not French. But I'm grateful to God for this French saint, who wanted to be Jesus' brother, to become, like Jesus, the "universal brother," the brother of all: the Muslims' brother, the nomads' brother, the soldiers' brother, the Tuaregs' brother, Moussa's brother, my big brother, our brother, Charles!

He rode through the night to reach the oasis of Taghit where he spent a month caring for wounded soldiers.
1903



With a Tuareg friend, 1913. Among the Tuareg it is the men who are veiled.

In Beni-Abbès with visitors.



FOUCAULD IN COLONIAL ALGERIA

Brother Charles was born into a world of empires, and he knew no other. The French colonization of Algeria had been underway for over 25 years when he was born, and he died 46 years before it ended. While he was a Trappist in Akbes, Syria, he had witnessed firsthand the genocide of indigenous Armenian Christians by agents of the Ottoman empire. It did not occur to him to question the over-arching system of empire itself; but under the influence of the Gospel, he poured himself into trying to do good within it.

Here two French scholars reflect on Br. Charles' relationship to the French colonization. Dominique Casajus (D.C.) is Research Director Emeritus at the French National Center for Scientific Research (the largest fundamental science agency in Europe). Paul Pandolfi (P.P.) is Professor Emeritus at the University of Montpellier in France, and a specialist in the study of the Tuareg of the Kel Ahaggar.

P.P.: Father de Foucauld shared the colonial ideology of his time, but for him it was something which should be meant to promote the good of the Tuareg. He saw them as children one had to educate so they could become full citizens of equal standing. His was an interpretation far removed from the colonialist extremists of the time, and he often found himself in opposition to them.

With a young Tuareg friend, Ouksem, whom he eventually took with him when he went for a visit to France



D.C.: For sure Foucauld shared the ideas of his time. But his counsels stood in strong contrast to the kind of thinking common among the colonizers at that period. In a letter written in 1912, he advised Moussa ag Amastan to teach his people French, so they "could, after a while, enjoy the same rights as the French, and the same privileges, and have representation in the Chamber of Deputies like them, and be treated by the

Government like them in everything.” He didn’t imagine the future of the Tuareg outside a French world, but he at least saw them having a role as full citizens within it. He also wrote in that same year, “If we forget to love our neighbor as we were commanded by God, our common Father, and if we forget the ‘brotherhood’ inscribed on our walls¹⁵, and we treat these people not as our children but as a resource to be exploited, the union we will have granted them will backfire on us and they’ll throw us into the sea the first moment they see the Europeans in difficulty.” There is no question he looked on the colonized people as children. But how many people in 1912 considered that the “‘brotherhood’ inscribed on our walls” applied to them as well?

Brother Charles wanted the French to accept the Tuareg as full citizens, and the Tuareg to function as such in French society. At the same time, he saw that the Tuareg were in danger of losing their ancient language and culture not only to western influence but also to that of the Arab Muslims who had conquered their land in earlier times. He did not believe authentic Tuareg identity and culture were incompatible with faith in Jesus Christ and the Gospel. So as he worked to create friendly, respectful relationships with the Tuareg, he also put all his energy and intellectual capacities into helping preserve their cultural treasures. Mr. Casajus and Mr. Pandolfi share on this aspect of Foucauld’s presence:

D.C.: Twenty-six letters written by different Tuareg people to Charles de Foucauld have survived to our day. They are in Tifinagh, the script used to write the Tuareg Berber language. Those correspondents who have been identified belonged either to the entourage of Moussa ag Amastan, the then-current supreme chief of the Hoggar Tuareg, or to the tribe of the Dag Ghâli, the common people of the lands where Foucauld lived. The letters address him as “*marabout*” (or “*mr bw*” in the Tuareg writing, which uses only consonants and certain final vowels).¹⁶ They also use the word “*amghar*,” a general term of respect for an older man. One also finds “*ämidi*,” “companion”; or “*emeri*,” “dear friend.”

The letters’ authors request small gifts; thank him for medicines; ask him to pass on their greetings to his sister. One writer promises to get him some cheese; others give news of a birth, or a death. The tone of the letters is very familiar, one might even say affectionate. This tone of familiarity appears in Foucauld’s own diary, where we see him asking about someone’s marriage, or attending to people in their final moments and

15 Refers to the motto of France, “Liberty, equality, brotherhood.”

16 The word is used by Muslims to signify a holy man.

then being present at the burial.

Moussa ag Amastan also uses the terms *ämidi*, *emeri*, or *marabout*, and additionally, in a letter dated January 5, 1914, he calls Foucauld *aklin-Ghissa*, “servant of Jesus.” What Moussa conveys in his letters sheds extraordinary light on their rapport. The January 5 letter is very warm, and ends with these words: “Don’t abandon me. I want one thing of you: pray for me very much.” Another letter, dated March 6, 1914, contains this sentence: “I will follow your advice as long as I live, because it is the advice of a loving friend.” Such words seem to show that the misunderstandings which inevitably arose did not preclude a certain depth of relationship between the Saint-Cyr¹⁷ graduate turned Trappist at the age of 32, and the Tuareg chief who rediscovered religion after a youth spent warring and romancing the ladies.

P.P.: First, an obvious fact often forgotten: Fr. de Foucauld’s choice of the Hoggar for his installation had been imposed on him by the French military... At that time, the Tuareg were in the process of bowing to the power of the colonizers, and they had no choice but to accept the marabout’s presence in Tamanrasset, despite their reluctance. But Foucauld was quickly able to cement bonds with the local population, particularly with the Dag Ghâli. Some of them became “true friends” with him. His diary witnesses to this fact, as does his decision to bring one of them with him to France in 1913. I witnessed for myself, when I did my research among the Dag Ghâli, that the memory of that special relationship is still alive in some of them.



17 French military academy

D.C.: Foucauld collected, transcribed, and commented on 575 Tuareg poems (approximately 6,000 verses). A facsimile of his Tuareg-French dictionary in 4 volumes [it was written entirely in longhand] was published in 1951 and 1952.

These two works are of a precision and richness unlike anything published in Tuareg country up to that time. Every specialist has a copy of them in his/her library; one has merely to look at a bibliography of published works on the Tuareg language to realize how relevant they still are.

Facsimiles from his handwritten and illustrated dictionary

1.371.

la pensée de l'autre, à tel point que, de même que les personnes jeunes, ne prononcent pas devant des hom. âgés qui'elles, respectent le mot d'ahat elles, ne prononcent pas non plus celui d'imijad || l'imijad se compose

AB = manche
 αβ = partie du manche qui passe sous la peau, entre les peaux et la cas. = Calbaste.
 αβK = calbaste.
 αβPQ = peau
 αβPQ = dernière p. peau qui tendent la peau sur la calbaste.
 CαC'αC' = chevalot.
 OαO' = ongles.
 E = ébranlé.
 PαP'E A'Y = dans un vison.
 P, Y = point où se fixe la corde du vison.
 M, V = corde de l'archet.

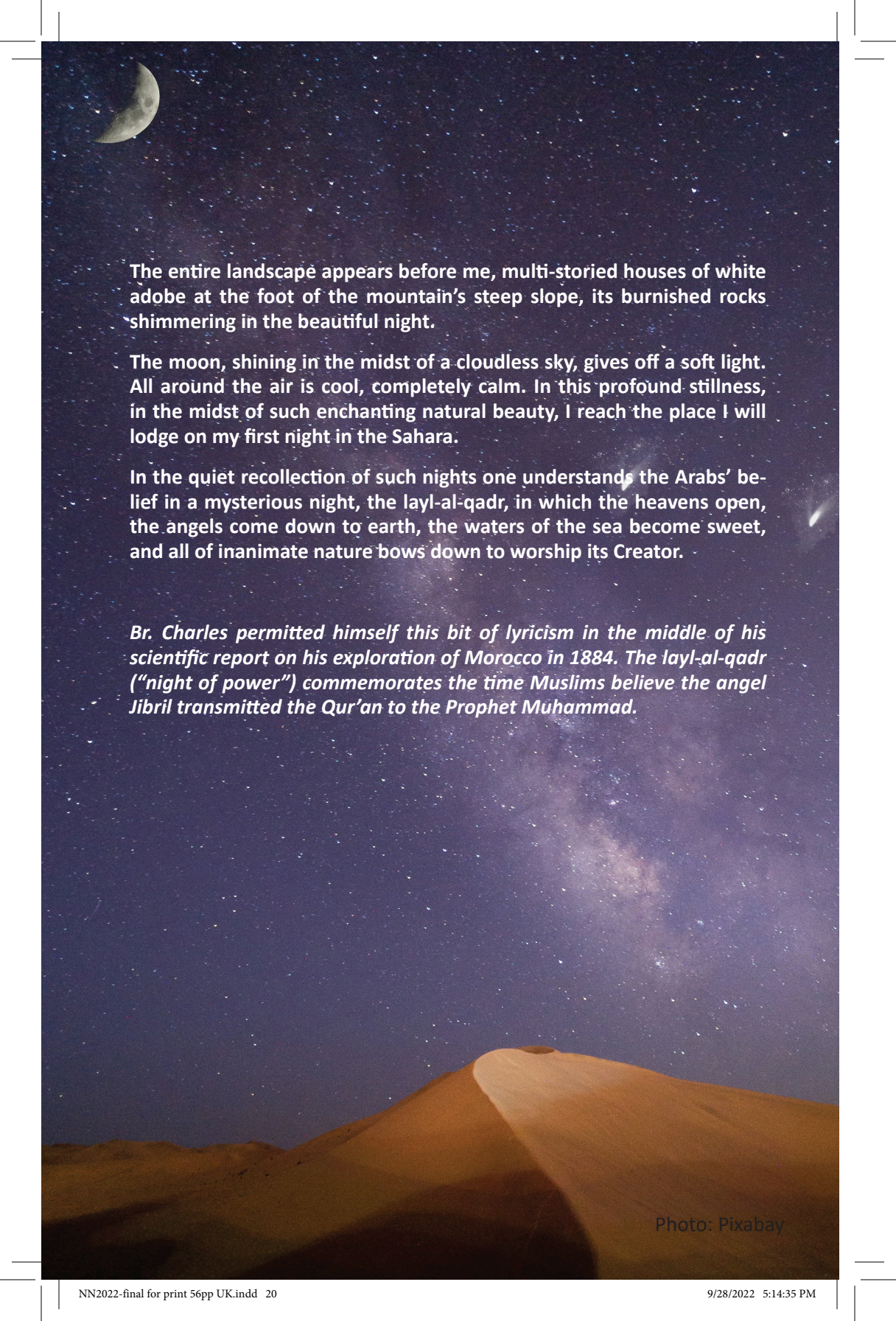
1.342.

toraxés, appelés, chacune toraxé (E), partant de la raie centrale, aplatis sur la tête, et allant perpendiculairement à la raie centrale les uns à droite, les autres à gauche, qui = sentant dans leur ensemble l'aspect que = tel de 2 bandeaux presque plats et presque unis l'un à droite et l'autre à gauche de la raie. La dernière toraxé de droite, celle qui touche au front (M), et la dernière toraxé de gauche, qui touche au front, (N), ont celui de leurs bords qui touche la finet finement tressé de la raie à l'oreille; à partir de l'oreille les cheveux qui ont servi à tresser le bord de la toraxé sont réunis aux autres cheveux de la même toraxé et tressés avec eux en une seule fine tresse qu'on fait passer sous l'oreille et qu'on ramène derrière la tête; le bord de toraxé tressé sur le front de la raie à l'oreille et la fine tresse qui lui fait suite s'appellent ensemble émési; toute coiffure de f. de l'Ah. compose l'émési de droite et l'émési de gauche; les 2 émési sont attachés ensemble derrière la tête sous les ankab || les toraxé de droite (1) et celles de gauche (2) sont réunies à hauteur de chaque oreille en un certain nombre de tresses appelées, chacune tabekket, qu'on laisse tomber naturellement || ces toraxé (1) et (2) qui sont à droite et

1.342.

lebasse demi-sphérique appelée teklas, itelka d'un manche de bois tabouit "bâton (manche) on tend une peau élem, et à laquelle on ajuste une 2e cheval; un chevalot formé de 2 petits bâtons

P.P.: I would add that Foucauld's work in this field is not only a collection of inestimable worth, but it also conveys a wealth of anthropological and historical facts. Additionally, thanks to the poems which Foucauld collected and translated, we have access to what one could call the ethos of the Tuareg people.



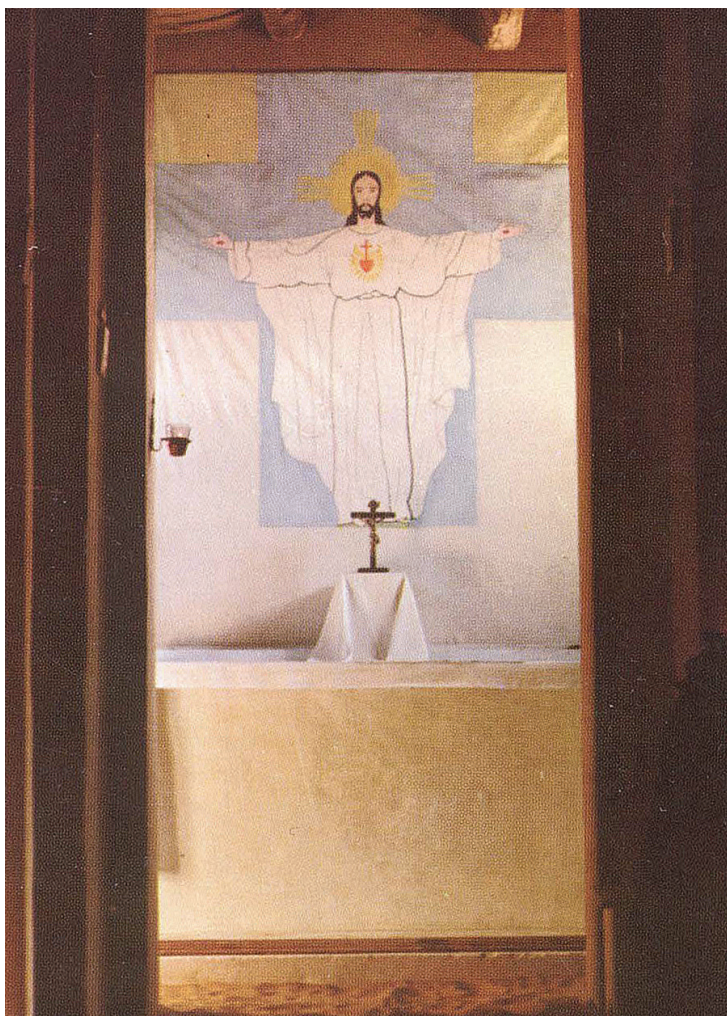
The entire landscape appears before me, multi-storied houses of white adobe at the foot of the mountain's steep slope, its burnished rocks shimmering in the beautiful night.

The moon, shining in the midst of a cloudless sky, gives off a soft light. All around the air is cool, completely calm. In this profound stillness, in the midst of such enchanting natural beauty, I reach the place I will lodge on my first night in the Sahara.

In the quiet recollection of such nights one understands the Arabs' belief in a mysterious night, the layl-al-qadr, in which the heavens open, the angels come down to earth, the waters of the sea become sweet, and all of inanimate nature bows down to worship its Creator.

Br. Charles permitted himself this bit of lyricism in the middle of his scientific report on his exploration of Morocco in 1884. The layl-al-qadr ("night of power") commemorates the time Muslims believe the angel Jibril transmitted the Qur'an to the Prophet Muhammad.

Photo: Pixabay



A copy of the image of the Sacred Heart which Brother Charles painted to adorn the altar in Beni-Abbès hangs there today. The chapel floor is the desert sand.

The fantastically beautiful landscapes of the Sahara, and its tough inhabitants' unabashed seeking of God in prayer, put Charles de Foucauld in touch with the hungers of his own soul. Then, Abbé Huvelin re-introduced him to Jesus Christ. And Charles understood the most astonishing greatness of all, something not present in the Islamic faith: the Divine Humility, the infinite mercy and unconditional love of God incarnate in the human person, the Workman of Nazareth.

"I lost my heart to this Jesus of Nazareth, crucified 1900 years ago, and I spend my life trying to imitate him as best as my weakness allows."

-From a letter to an old school friend, 1902

A RELATIONSHIP

Carlo Caretto (1910-1988), a Little Brother from Italy, wrote books on prayer in the tradition of our religious family. His writing was spare and simple, and it became a door of entry into the life and spirituality of Br. Charles for a good number of people. Lsr Kathleen is one such person. She is Canadian, living in England, and she wrote about her story for the English journal "The Tablet," who gave us permission to print this excerpt:



I first heard about Charles de Foucauld in 1974, reading Carlo Caretto's "Letters from the Desert." Until then, I had vaguely thought of entering a cloistered order. But Caretto spoke of "contemplation in the marketplace." Wasn't it in Nazareth that Jesus, Mary and Joseph had lived their contemplative lives? The incarnation had made ordinary life a meeting place with the Father.

Caretto mentioned Charles de Foucauld, a former French military officer. In the university library I found an old book on a dusty shelf that spoke about him. His writings seemed so pious and saccharine that I gave up. But later I met up with Madonna House ¹⁸ and found again the signpost indicating Nazareth as my life calling.

I joined the Little Sisters in Montreal in 1981. They lived in a small house in a working class neighborhood. One worked in the garment industry, another did cleaning, and the other two were at home, available for the neighbours who would often drop by. Noise from the street would pour into the chapel through the window. Far from distracting me, it became part of my prayer, shaping it according to the conditions the Son of God himself had chosen.

During my formation the little sisters spoke to me about our founders. Charles de Foucauld was a hard nut to crack. The most elderly sister in our region had lived in Algeria, and she told me a story I would remember. On one of her desert treks she had had to cross a riverbed, normally dry but at that moment swollen with sudden rain. Half way across she suddenly felt the current pulling her under, and she cried out, "Father de Foucauld, save me!" And she made it across safely. So there was a

¹⁸ Group of priests and laypeople founded by Catherine de Hueck Dougherty. They practice prayer "in the marketplace."

practical side to the man...

My next encounter with Charles de Foucauld was just before final vows. By then I knew myself and the community much better. Should I or shouldn't I go ahead with this commitment? I happened to be in Paris, visiting my grandmother before going to join the group preparing for final vows. One morning I walked to the Church of St. Augustine where Charles had had his life-changing experience in the confessional with Abbé Huvelin. The confessional was still there. I sat on the step for a long time, unburdening my heart. And a relationship began...

During the year of preparation, I finally started to understand that Beni-Abbès and Tamanrasset were two different places in Algeria, and that the Tuareg were an indigenous population not to be confused with Arabs. We were introduced to the idea that, if you wanted to get to know Charles de Foucauld, you shouldn't begin with his meditations but with his correspondence, since that is what anchored his life. Besides, 90% of his meditations came from one short period when he lived as a hermit in Nazareth.

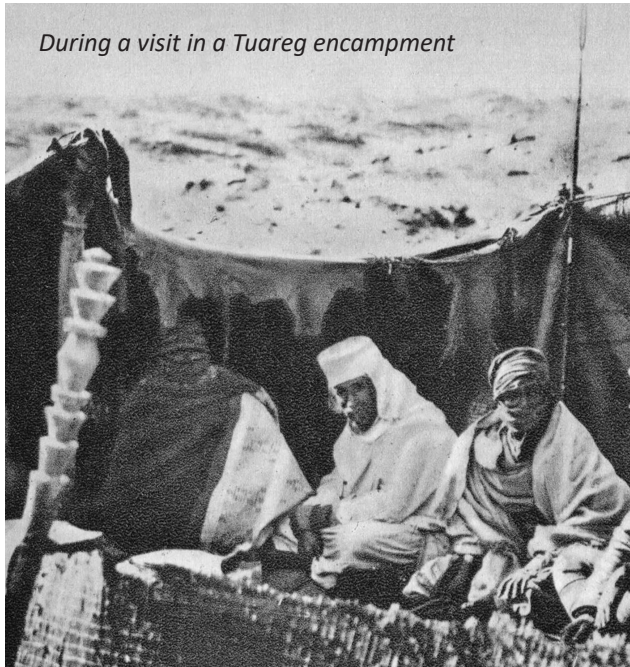
The one who really opened the door for me to encountering Brother Charles was the founder of the Little Brothers, René Voillaume. He admitted that Charles' Gospel meditations were dull and repetitive. But he said one should pay attention less to their content than to the consistency and zeal with which he had undertaken them. Fr. Voillaume said, "He constantly strove to know Jesus better because you cannot love what you do not know." He said he never approached Charles de Foucauld without coming away a better friend to his Lord and Brother, Jesus. That has been my experience too.

Today I live in Walsingham, a small village, "England's Nazareth." At age 59 I was lucky enough to get a job as a housekeeper in a hotel by the seaside, 5 miles away. I travel by bike in all kinds of weather. There with co-workers I encounter the world of the rural poor. None of the people I work with were churchgoers, and none have become churchgoers since I started there. I'm no more successful than Brother Charles, who never converted anyone. All know I am a nun, but what do they make of me? Brother Charles wanted to cry the Gospel with his life. I'm not sure I always come across as a shining example of an evangelical life. But my prayer is that through my presence people would discover God's love and care for them.

Brother Charles arrived in Tamanrasset with a translation of the

Gospel he made with the help of an interpreter who accompanied the convoy, but once settled there he discovered how worthless it was. He requested help from a friend who was a specialist in Berber dialects, who taught him to begin by listening. A language is bigger than words. They spent hours around the campfire listening to people sing, recite poetry, and narrate their valiant deeds.

Isn't that what Jesus did for 30 years in Nazareth, where the Word of God kept silence and listened? The people of Nazareth gave him a language for speaking about God, stories about sheep and seeds, about sons that ran away to the big city and women sweeping their homes to find lost coins. They would later be amazed to hear him speak of the Kingdom of God in terms of their own lives.



Pope Paul VI wrote, “Before we can convert the world, we must approach it and speak to it... and before speaking, we must take great care to listen not only to what people say, but more especially to what they have in their hearts.”¹⁹

Perhaps the special gift of being a contemplative among the poor is to discover just how attentively God loved the world...

19 Ecclesiam Suam 68,87.

THE “VOICE OF PALESTINE”

The people of the Algerian Sahara owned and trafficked enslaved persons, especially people originating from sub-Saharan Africa. Br. Charles, though he deeply loved the authentic local culture, was not blind to its darker side. Inspired by chapter 56 of Isaiah with its warning to “the shepherds” of God’s people not to be “sleeping watchdogs” in the face of injustice, he called on the French colonial authorities to enforce the abolition of the slave trade in their colonies, and he reproached the Church hierarchy for being silent on the issue. But they resisted his impassioned appeals, unwilling to anger the local slave owners or the French government who had the power to have the entire Church presence completely thrown out of the colony. (In France, the policy of disbanding religious Orders and seizing properties was an ongoing reality since the Revolution.) Br. Charles did what he could, then, and ransomed a few individuals out of his own resources and funds he raised from family and friends in France.

The little sisters who live with Palestinians in east Jerusalem and the West Bank find themselves also in a situation of injustice, in a land colonized by an occupation force. The voices of ordinary Palestinians are seldom heard on the world stage—people in power today also don’t want to “rock the boat.” But sometimes, one cannot be a “sleeping watchdog”. They write:

On May 15, the day Br. Charles was canonized, the second reading at Mass spoke of the heavenly Jerusalem. Myself, I want to share with you what we’ve been living these last few days here in the earthly Jerusalem.

Tension has been building in the country for months, and it has caused our lives to flow to the rhythm of attacks followed by acts of collective retaliation. On Wednesday, May 11, all Palestine was shaken by the news: Shireen Abu Akleh, a 51-year-old journalist, had been killed covering a “military operation” by the Israeli army in Jenin, a city in the north of the Palestinian Territories.

Shireen was called “the Voice of Palestine.” She had been covering the most tragic events in the life of our people for 25 years. She was a Christian from Jerusalem, born in Bethlehem. She was loved and appreciated by all the people, without distinction. On Wednesday morning it was a Muslim neighbor who gave us the news, tears in her eyes. On Thursday, May 12, there was a national funeral service in Ramallah. Afterwards, her body was transported to St. Joseph’s, an East Jerusalem hospi-

tal, since a funeral had been arranged for Friday the 13th at the Greek-Catholic Patriarchate in the Old City of Jerusalem (which is our parish church). The hospital is in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood, which became famous recently because Arab families there were driven out to make way for Israeli settlers. Shireen Abu Akleh had done a lot of reporting on that. The plan was to carry her remains through this neighborhood, as far as the Old City.

What happened Friday made the news itself. The Israeli police attacked the funeral procession, ripping away the Palestinian flags and striking the pallbearers, causing the coffin to slip nearly to the ground. The surveillance cameras at St. Joseph's show the soldiers shooting at the ambulance drivers and chasing the people up into the hospital. In the space of just a few minutes several people were wounded or arrested. The coffin finally had to be put into a van to be carried to the Old City.

When we saw all this going on, we were afraid the police would block all the roads around our neighborhood, but finally we were able to get to the church without too much difficulty...

It seems that such an assembly as this had not happened here in Jerusalem in quite a long time. Thousands of people, most of them young, Muslims and Christians together, came to pay respects to Shireen "the martyr." While they waited for the procession to arrive, people were pressing to get into the church. "For now, we are only allowing the family in," the guard said. And someone answered, "We're all her family!"

When the procession did arrive, only a small part of the crowd could get in. The group was still made up of Christians and Muslims together. Representatives of every Christian denomination came to the celebration—even the Greek Orthodox Patriarch, who had NEVER in history put his foot in a Greek Catholic church! The Boy Scouts who accompanied the procession sang the hymns of Good Friday, the ones for Christ's burial. After the celebration the coffin was carried to the cemetery near the Old City. Every few meters the police violently broke into the human tide, ripping away flags, pushing people to the ground, hitting them... One girl who was walking beside me, barely 15 years old, was dragged away by the police... One of our friends was struck hard with a club... But the march went on, the people chanting, "By our lives, and by our blood, we will pay for you Shireen!"²⁰ and "Muslims and Christians,

20 A traditional Arabic protest chant, used to express solidarity with a person, cause, or country (WordReference.com Language Forums, "With our souls, with our blood," May 20, 2010)

we have the same Homeland!” At the moment when she was laid to rest, the bells of all the churches began to ring.

On Monday, May 16, the Sisters who run St. Joseph’s invited us to the hospital, where the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, the Orthodox Patriarch, the Apostolic Delegate, and other religious leaders were gathered to condemn what had happened on Friday. Their communiqué concluded, “The actions of the occupation police were entirely unprovoked and unjustified. We condemn as well the irresponsible actions taken by the Israeli occupation police against the hospital and its personnel.” And then they showed us video footage of what had taken place.

It will surely take us some time to “digest” what we’ve lived through the last few days, the violent images, but also the scenes of great unity, and of the people’s courage.

I’d like to end this sharing with a little text posted on social media by our Muslim neighbor and friend:

“In the Christian tradition of the Way of the Cross, a woman takes a cloth and wipes the face of Christ, covered with blood, dirt, and sweat. This woman was called Veronica²¹. This name is made up of two words: ‘Vera,’ which means ‘true,’ and ‘ikonika,’ which means ‘image.’ This is because it is a revelation of the true face of God’s Envoy, Jesus, the son of Mary.

As for the martyr Shireen Abu Akleh, she revealed to the world the true face and the voice of the victims of the occupation, an evil which was also present at the time of our master Jesus, may peace be upon him.”

*Photo:
The ‘true image’ of
God mysteriously
revealed in the midst
of human suffering.
Sixth Station,
Way of the Cross,
St. Matthew’s
Cathedral,
Washington, DC*



21 A Muslim neighbor would know of this legend because our house is at the “Sixth Station” (“Veronica wipes the face of Jesus”) along the Via Dolorosa. The traditional “Way of the Cross” in Jerusalem passes through an ordinary Arab neighborhood.

HOME FOR CHRISTMAS

Islam rejects the major truths of Christian faith in Jesus—his saving death and resurrection, and the incarnation of the second Person of the Trinity in the infant of Bethlehem. But there are echoes of Jesus' presence in Qur'anic stories, and our Muslim neighbors often like to join us for our Christmas celebrations. Like Br. Charles, who wanted to be a "universal brother," we try to meet people in the places we have in common, in our shared humanity and desire for relationship. The little sisters of Mosul, Iraq wrote about what happened when they returned from Kurdistan, where they had fled with other Christians when Daesh [i.e., the "Islamic state"] had driven them out of their homes:

In all the places we met each other, whether in taxis, in stores, or on the streets, we felt how happy Muslims were that we had returned: "You light up Mosul!" Our first Christmas back had a special feel, simple but moving:

While we were in the park one day, a young Muslim woman and her sister came to offer us some coffee. They just wanted to express their joy at our return, and to welcome us back. We invited them to sit with us, and that was how our friendship began.

On December 24, that young woman invited us to her house in the afternoon. At first we said no, because Mass was at 5 pm. But she insisted so much, offering to drop us off at the Cathedral in time, that we finally accepted. What wasn't our surprise when we discovered that she had prepared an entire feast for us, with her family and friends. There was a Christmas tree in the corner, a table loaded with sweets, a cake, and of course tea... We spent a lovely time together.

A shy child who came to visit us with his mother noticed that we didn't have a Christmas tree at our own house (the Crib is meaningless to a Muslim child). When he went home, he dragged his Dad to go with him to buy a little tree, which he decorated; and then he dressed up like Santa Claus and came full of joy to bring it to us. His thoughtfulness touched us deeply!

The Mass had none of the splendor we are used to seeing. It was poor, and moving, calling to mind the birth of Jesus simple and poor in Bethlehem. There were very few people. Three prominent Muslim men—the three wise men—came to be with us. It was a gift to witness their joy

at seeing Mass celebrated once again in our church, and their desire to have the Christians return to their city.



We were invited every day of Christmas week to the homes of Muslim friends. This time, instead of it being we who were sharing our joy with others, it was they who did everything they could to make us happy.

Of course, there are still extremists. But we saw how many times they took the initiative to show their desire that we be able to live together.

CONTEMPLATIVE IN THE HEART OF THE WORLD

As Brother Charles moved from a Trappist monastery to a Palestinian hermitage to a hut on the outskirts of an Algerian village, he was trying to put into action an insight that was forming slowly in his heart. “Contemplative life in the world,” as the spiritual family of Br. Charles came to call it, involves among other things the sacred act of paying attention in the midst of life’s humdrum situations and events. Lsr Norma shared briefly about a typical day lived with that kind of mindfulness of God’s presence, in Havana, Cuba, where poverty and shortages of life’s necessities are a daily experience:

“Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will proclaim your praise...” It is with these words that we begin our daily prayer. Not far away, we also hear the calls of the bread vendors, the neighbor ringing a bell to greet his gods, the roosters crowing, the dogs, the coffee pot, etc...

Brother Charles’ conviction that “Jesus made ordinary life the place of encounter with God” is an intuition many people live without realizing it. I think of that when I’m in the street, and I meet people going to work, or going to the bakery to pick up bread for breakfast, or to save for lunch.

That will be the first line they have to wait in that day...

L., standing on the street corner, tells me about his little son’s first acts of mischief, and a little further along, one neighbor is explaining to another where to get oil, picadillo²², or precious cigarettes which have become so hard to find these days. “You won’t find many varieties there, but you’ll find lots of people,” she says.

In the middle of the morning, E. comes to our place to ask once again if “San Rafael House” has a place yet for his friend J., an elderly man who is quite sick and lives alone. Interestingly, E. himself is 70, walks with a cane, and has been living in a shelter for 11 years, ever since his house was blown down by a hurricane. He never loses hope that his friend will one day get the care and companionship he needs.

If we are happy to taste a little ice cream for dessert, it is even more enjoyable when we know it was J. who shared it with us. Being old, alone,

22 A traditional Cuban-style hash.

and sick has been a great trial for a man of faith like J. He is grateful and generous, so often openhanded with others. Today he shares with us a portion of what he received from his only daughter, who lives with her family in the U.S. His gifts are sacred offerings, a taste of the Kingdom.



Lsrs Norma, Saroj, Roselyne, Rosetta and Emanuela with friends.

Later in the afternoon, on the sidewalk directly in front of our house or across the street, a small crowd gathers to sit outside, gamble, drink, etc. One guesses what they're talking about by the sound of their voices, loud or soft... life is restless, and refuses to back down in the face of difficulties.

In the evening, there is a moment of silence, before we give thanks for what we have lived that day: the people we have met, the visits we've made, the situations, the fatigue, the joys, all pass through our hearts... and finally the prayer of abandonment²³ reminds us that we are loved by the Father, just like the boys coming out now to stand on the street corner with their music, just when we are getting ready to go to bed. I lie down with a grateful heart, and also with the hope that they, too, will go to sleep quickly...

As we prepared this edition of News Notes, we learned that the little sisters' friend J. passed away...

23 Prayer based on Jesus' self-surrender to the Father, condensed from one of Br. Charles' meditations. The members of all the branches of the Foucauld family traditionally recite it at the end of the day.

A MOMENT OF TRUST

The whole purpose of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, of all his preaching and miracles, was to restore our relationship with God. The Triune God he revealed, is relationship. Brother Charles wanted to preach this truth by his life, in a place where proclaiming it in words was not possible. And so he made himself a brother to the people of the Sahara. He wrote, "The Tuareg of the area trust me more and more; old friends become closer; new friendships form. I do what I can and I try to show my love." And when they trusted and cared for him in turn, he was grateful.

Lebanon is suffering from hunger and want due to extreme economic collapse. Lsr Rania went back there after 10 years in Italy, to be with her people during this hard time. She wrote of a moment of light in the darkness, when the exchange of trust was a gift:

At the beginning, I felt like a stranger in my own country. I had the impression we were living in a lost time, and that we Lebanese were never going to be able to move forward. Many people are wondering, "How are we going to keep going?" One gets the impression we will never get back the lost time. We lose possibilities of getting together because of the pandemic. We lose time searching through markets for our daily food at a price we can afford, and for medicines we know the pharmacies will never have available. We lose sick people who die because they can't afford to go to the hospital. We lose our youth, who emigrate because there are no jobs in the country...



Lsr Rania at left

I would like to share with you a consolation I received during this dark time. I was on my way home from a place located quite far from our house, and I didn't have enough money to pay for a taxi. So, I decided to walk.

A taxi stopped, but I turned it down. A second one arrived, and I turned it down, too. And then the driver said to me, "Sister, I don't want money. I want to take you where you're going so that we can pray a rosary together."

I accepted. In fact, he turned out to be just then praying the rosary along with the radio program "Way of Charity." He simply asked me, "Where are you going?"

When we arrived, I tried to give him at least the little I had in my pocket, but he refused. "Sister, the price I'm asking is that you pray for me and for my wife, who's in a depression because of the hard economic situation. She beats the children violently. Please, pray with me that peace might return to our house..."

No, time is not lost. I need the other and the other needs me. It is a moment full of respect and sharing.

"I find much consolation in the company of the Tuareg. I can't tell you how good they have been to me, what upright souls I find among them. One or two are my true friends, something so rare and precious anywhere ... from [them] I can ask for advice or help for anything. I know that they will always do their best to help me... How did they become attached to me? In the same way anyone does. I didn't give them gifts, but they understood they had found a friend in me, that I was devoted to them, that they could trust me..."

-Charles de Foucauld, Letters to friends, 1908 and 1913



PRESENCE WHERE THE CHURCH IS ABSENT

Br. Charles wanted to be with those “farthest away” from the good news of Jesus, and so he went to the peoples who lived in the deepest reaches of the inhospitable Sahara desert. In the same spirit, three little sisters in Dapoya, in the west African nation of Burkina Faso, went to live in a neighborhood where women earn a living through prostitution.

There are three of us, from three different nationalities and generations: L.Srs. Noëlie, Nicole-Yawa, and Maria Theresia.



Noëlie: Founding a community was a new experience for all three of us. That is both a weakness we share and a source of strength, because we have to invent everything together. Three women trying to agree on how to arrange a house... some difficult moments of accomodating one another! Maria-Theresa made us a small above-ground garden, and Nicole grew flowers and a mango tree. We hope that by next year we can invite you to come enjoy its fruit with us!

We took two days of prayer apart in order to help us build our communal life together.

Nicole-Yawa: We have to try to get to know the world around us. We go by small steps, with patience, tact, and perseverance. Then true heart-to-heart encounters can take place. Today I’m reflecting on the trust people have shown us; also, the importance of allowing ourselves to “smell like” the neighborhood in order to understand it better.

One evening I was in the chapel. The deafening music coming from the “maquis” (bars) and discotheques that surround us seemed a powerful call to me to take into my prayer and my heart all these people of the night, especially the young girls (often from other countries) waiting for

customers... We meet them every morning on our way to Mass, and we try to get to know them; we greet them, and sometimes they respond warmly.

Noëlie: From greeting each other every day, we've started getting to know some of them. One morning I said hello to two girls who were walking with a young boy, and I was surprised to hear them say, "Sister, pray for us, we want to get a different job," and the boy said, "I want to become a policeman, pray for me." I was so astonished I didn't know how to respond. Finally I said, "OK, I will."

Nicole-Yawa: Some days the road seems long and dark, as it must have seemed to the Magi following the star. There are such stark contrasts in this neighborhood. It was an old residential neighborhood, and there are still some families that have been here from way back. And then there is the world of the "maquis," where the young girls who came to "make a living" stay. And there are young vendors who buy items and resell them, passing by all day trying to sell something just to be able to eat. It is rare that we can visit someone, such deeper relationships take time and patience.



Isrs Nicole Yawa and Juliette Magdeleine just behind our house.

Noëlie: What I'm discovering about our mission here is that it is a presence of the Church in a place where it is otherwise "completely absent." Cardinal Philippe often reminds us of this. Even if some priests are

skeptical about what we're doing, I'm surprised at the conversations we have with others. Two of them are particularly interested in the relationships we have with our friends. At first, one said to me bluntly, "Go look for another kind of work, you're wasting your time. Who sent you on such a mission? Your parents and your grandparents didn't bother with the pleasure girls." I told him that they too are "children of Abraham." After we exchanged a few more words that same priest told me, "It must be said, we don't know anything about their reality." Together we recognized that we're all in some way responsible for this scourge that's destroying so many persons, in spite of themselves. No one can "cast the first stone."

We have to walk together, listening to every person. That is the call of the SYNOD."

TO BRING JESUS

Fascinated as he was by the desert, and drawn by temperament to solitude, yet Br. Charles did not go to the Sahara just to be alone but to draw close to the people who lived there. He wanted to bring them Jesus, present in the Eucharist. He had felt Jesus saying to him, "It is love that should recollect you in me interiorly, not being far from my children. See me in them, and like me at Nazareth, live close to them, lost in God." The little sisters of Vietnam were recently able to establish the Eucharistic presence in a new community in a place called Vinh Hoa. Lsr Emmanuelle Anh wrote:

When we requested the Bishop's permission to make our foundation, we were quite precise as to what its mission would be:

- We would have Eucharistic adoration, and intercessory prayer for our brothers and sisters.
- We would share the social condition of poor workers.
- We would practice the Little Sisters' traditional handicraft, fashioning figures in clay in order to share the "Christmas message," the mystery of Bethlehem.

We chose Vinh Hoa because it is in a province known for clay work. We would have friends who could help us enter their world. And we would be able to find the supplies we need: clay, and an affordable kiln made on the premises. Also, there is a famous pottery business there.

The land we were able to settle on is kind of far from the city center, because it is what we could afford with our resources. But there is good public transportation. And there is a church just 8 minutes' walk from our house. It was a Christian village, in fact, but one which had gone through a series of ups and downs: war from 1954-1975, problems in relations among the people, and a need for renewal of faith.



The date for the Mass of thanksgiving for the birth of the community was set for Dec 1, the feast of Charles de Foucauld. We prayed that all would go well, since the covid pandemic had left everything so uncertain. We had to propose the date knowing that it was not easy for people to assemble. We prepared everything, and we waited... and the Lord answered at the last minute: only two days ahead we learned that the Bishop would in fact be able to come and preside.

The big event is over now, but it echoes in our hearts... We feel gratitude to God, and to all those he sends us as channels of his presence. This foundation was the work of so many, an effort by people truly collaborating as brothers and sisters! It is a gift of families and friends, and of numerous other communities. Their sharing of themselves is visible in the house and in the garden, from the table and cupboard to the bookcases and the chairs, from the gate to the walls, the fish pond, the plants, etc.



Together we give thanks to God, and also to St. Joseph, who played such an important part in the construction from beginning to end, and so often sustained us in difficult moments.

The parishioners know we pray every day, that we are there before the Eucharist like a little lamp, to intercede for them. I had the joy of seeing one of our neighbors come to spend a few moments in our chapel; perhaps others will come for a quick visit with Jesus, in this place where the door is open to all and which Br. Charles wanted to be called a “fraternity” - a place where each one is welcome as a brother or sister.



PRODIGAL SON

The sight of tough, proud, desert-dwelling Muslims prostrating in prayer, and the wise direction of Fr. Huvelin were not the only forces that brought Charles de Foucauld back to the Christian faith. The quiet, kindly example of certain family members and friends, and God’s Spirit blowing like the wind, free of human conventions, accompanied him along his winding way. The little sisters in Belfast, N. Ireland observed:

Like many people today, Charles de Foucauld left the Church and the faith, and lived a life without God. Years passed. When he returned from his exploration of Morocco, the welcome of his own family, who respected him despite his loss of faith and morality, touched him deeply: “I found

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myself," he wrote in a letter, "in the company of certain persons—very intelligent, very virtuous, very Christian—and I thought to myself, Maybe this religion isn't so absurd after all... At the same time, an inner grace, extremely powerful, was driving me... I started going into churches, without believing. It's just that that was the only place I felt at ease, and I spent long hours repeating this strange prayer, 'My God, if you exist, make me know You...'"

The warmth of his family, their goodness, was the cradle of his faith. Our young people today are often not unlike Br. Charles. We see how important it is for Church and family to welcome those who have strayed—like Charles de Foucauld's family—without judging, without condemning.

We note, too, how the miracle necessary for Br. Charles' canonization was granted to a young man who was not even baptized.²⁴ It shows how God works beyond our lack of faith. Yes, God's love goes far beyond our laws and labels!

Following Br. Charles our foundress, Isr Magdeleine, had the intuition to witness God's love and mercy through friendship between people of different religions, backgrounds, and nationalities. Love is powerful, and works in freedom. It is God's Will!

Let us pray to Br. Charles, this new saint, that he may give support to families and guide their dear ones who have strayed in one way or another.

L.Sr. Emiko with friends who are local "black taxi" drivers, so called because of the color of the cabs they drove to service Catholics during the time of the "Troubles," when Catholics had great difficulty accessing safe public transportation.



24 See the account in News Notes 2020

A SIMPLE GLASS OF WATER

There are countries today where it can be dangerous to be a Christian and a foreigner, as it was for Brother Charles in the Morocco or Algeria of his time. And as there were local Muslim people who risked their lives to protect him or be in contact with him, so there are local people who sometimes take risks to enter into relationship with us. Lsr Anila speaks of an experience in Pakistan:



In 1996 I was sent to Multan. There I started working in an occupational therapy center for handicapped persons; it was called “Umeed Gah,” “Place of Hope.” The Center sent me to a neighborhood where the government had housed Indian refugees at the time of the Partition of India in 1947. At that time there were some Protestant women whom the people called “Aunties,” who visited families, helped mothers give birth, did vaccinations, etc. The families of the neighborhood respected these women, who told stories taken from the Bible or distributed little booklets with Bible stories in them. These women got around by bicycle, unlike women from the country, and because the people had gotten used to seeing them do this, I was also able to travel by bike and be well accepted.

One very hot day in the neighborhood, I was welcomed into the home of a Muslim woman of Indian origin, and she gave me a glass of cold water. Thus began a great friendship. In the weeks following, she invited me in for tea, then for a meal—a very spicy one. While I ate, the lady’s daughters got much enjoyment watching me cry! Later on there were invitations to weddings and births, and sharing of sorrows.

Through this woman I got to know many other families who had a handicapped child or two. She herself had had nine children, and had lost three. Other funerals followed with the death of her father and then her husband. This lady became more than a friend, she became a sister! She was very welcoming toward all. She came to our house with her younger brother, and asked me to pray, and we said the “Our Father.”

She attended the various parties at the Center, and around the neighborhood she helped sell the little packages of laundry soap the boys at the Center learned to make.

We had to close our community in Pakistan, but just before we left

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she came to see us. In fact, at that time we couldn't move around freely any more because of the risk of getting kidnapped, and we had been obliged to go everywhere accompanied by a security guard! She came to our door and said, "It's out of love that I have come to visit my sisters! You understand?"

I am sure that today Jesus would say to us regarding the people like her that we've known, "Amen I say to you, there are many who will go before you into the Kingdom of Heaven!"



ONE PERSON AT A TIME

On January 13, 1904, Br. Charles joined a convoy to southern Algeria. After journeying for five months, he wrote his "Observations on missionary travel in the Sahara." Based on his experiences with persons he had encountered along the way, he described in detail how future missionaries should enter into contact with the different peoples who inhabited the region. Lsr Adriana from Argentina reflected on his notes:

Br. Charles makes distinctions based on the persons the future missionaries might wish to reach out to: Christians, indigenous soldiers, slaves, inhabitants of the Saoura valley, or Tuareg. On the subject of "the holy Gospel: it is quite difficult to talk about religious matters with the people of the Saharan oases or the Saoura; such conversations run the risk of becoming harsh and creating a gulf between them and us, rather than drawing them closer in charity." (Beni-Abbès notebook, 1901-1905, p.132).

This man who wanted to live as a “universal brother” understood that the universal nature of love could only happen if it became incarnate in concrete, personal relationships. Every person is singular, unique, and so is the bond we create with him or her. There is not just one way of loving, and there is not just one way of entering into relationship with others.

This is one of the things about Br. Charles that struck me most, and it has its roots deep in the Gospel. Jesus doesn’t love us “en masse.” His love for each one of us is unique. The loving relationship he invites us to, takes into account our history, our identity, our dreams, our sorrows, our passions. It is a love filled with respect and understanding. It does us no violence. And it makes us free. It respects the time we need to take, letting us go one step at a time. Jesus shares our time, shares our life—and this is how we too are invited to love!

Today I thank the Spirit for the persons in my life who helped me feel loved unconditionally, who recognized what is unique in me and walked my road with me, supported me in my weaknesses and renewed my deepest desire from day to day. They all feel close to “our” brother Charles—obviously he doesn’t belong just to us, but rather truly deserves the title “universal brother.”

"Look at the saints. But let us not spend too much time contemplating them. Learn from their example, but without tarrying there too long. Rather, let us take from each one what seems to us most in conformity with the words and examples of our Lord Jesus, our true and only model. Learn from them, not in order to be like them, but to be more like Jesus."

-Brother Charles of Jesus



“THE ONE AND ONLY MODEL”

*As Fr. Voillaume noted, the repetitive language with which Charles de Foucauld filled notebooks during countless hours meditating on the Gospels is not the point. The point is that he did it. He pored over the Gospels again and again to find what it meant to imitate Jesus. The Gospels were the forge into which he plunged his soul, to be fashioned by the Holy Spirit (he prayed the ancient prayer, *Veni Creator Spiritus*, “Come Creator Spirit,” three times a day). Very early he compiled a set of Gospel verses in which he copied down the sayings and actions that were the concrete expressions of Jesus’ attitudes, his soul. He called it “The One and Only Model.” And that is what he set out to live.*

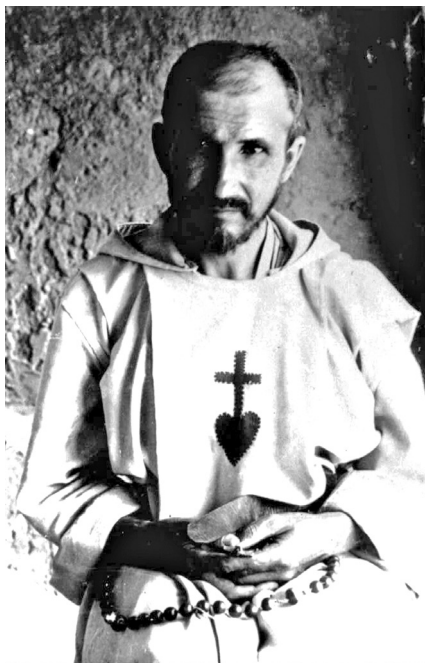
Lsr Maria Patricia from Chile wrote:

When I left school, I was given a book, Rene Bazin’s book²⁵ about Br. Charles. I only read it a few years later. I found that he was an extraordinary man, strange, but with good ideas.

After some time, a friend and I went to Maipu, where the little sisters had a community. What I first saw at the entrance was a photo of this strange man with the good ideas—Brother Charles!

The idea that most struck me was “Nazareth”—religious life among regular people (even if we always stick out a bit!) For me, Nazareth eventually meant 25 years working in a factory.

What Brother Charles gives me today is the fact that he brings us to Jesus. I don’t read him that much, his style can grate on me. But he was a man passionate about Jesus, and passionate about the Gospel...



²⁵ “Charles de Foucauld: explorateur au Maroc, ermite du Sahara,” the first biography of Charles de Foucauld, published in 1921.

There is an ancient Oriental icon which has been redone to show Br. Charles pointing to Jesus. He shows us the way.



"You must seek to be thoroughly filled with the Spirit of Jesus by reading and re-reading, meditating on his words and examples over and over without ceasing. May they shape our souls the way drops of water carve stone when they fall on the same place over and over again..."

Br. Charles to his friend Louis Massignon

CELEBRATION AT THE SOURCE

The canonization of St. Charles occasioned celebrations all over the world. Some even took place in Morocco, the place Charles de Foucauld had made his dangerous 1883 exploration disguised as a poor Jewish rabbi. He dearly desired to return to Morocco, to bring the Gospel to the people he had encountered there, but the closest he could manage to get was southwestern Algeria. Years later it became possible for little sisters to settle in Morocco. They wrote of their experience this past year:

Our "Charles de Foucauld" group decided to make a presentation in every parish or place where there are Christians in Morocco, especially

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following the route he had followed at the time of his exploration. He had travelled from Tétouan to Ksar el Kebir with a caravan. His scientific account has quite a few passages of surprising humanity, such as the following:

"5 July – We leave the hostel at 4 am. The caravan grows by three persons: a man on his way to Fes, carrying a cage with six canaries he plans to sell there in hopes of making 30 francs; and a woman and her little girl going I don't know where...

6 July – Departure at 5 am. We arrive in El Qsar at 4 pm. Big event: the canary man announces his wedding: walking along he got to know our other travelling companion, and she pleased him; he asked for her hand; she accepted; they will get married in El Qsar. He'll sell the canaries wherever he can, and the money will serve as wedding gift and to cover the costs of the feast.

7 July – Saturday, I have to stay here for 24 hours. Lodging is very hard to find, I ran all over the place trying to find a room. And what a room I got! I would have never believed so many spiders and mice could survive in such a small space... Around the town there are orchards, I saw beautiful orange groves, lovingly maintained with waterwheels."²⁶

We went to Ksar el Kebir²⁷ to offer to make a presentation, wondering how we'd do it since there's no parish. The only Christians there are four religious sisters, Inma, Anna, Conchi and Francisca, who are Daughters of Charity. And lo and behold, we discovered they really love Brother Charles, and they were full of ideas!

Ksar el Kebir is still a poor town. The Daughters of Charity welcome children and young people, some for meals, others to work in their library, and others for job training. All are Moroccan. The sisters wrote about the celebration for Br. Charles :

"We celebrated with our students aged 8-17, and with the adults who work with us. May 16 is the U.N.'s International Day of Living Together in Peace, and we used that day to introduce St. Charles de Foucauld as 'the universal brother.'

"The music teacher and his students chose meaningful songs: American singer Michael Jackson's 'We Are the World' in French, followed by Arab songs about peace, love, mutual help, and many other important values, in particular the music of the great Lebanese singer Fairuz. They filled our house with joy.

²⁶ From the written report of Charles de Foucauld's exploration of Morocco.

²⁷ Same as El Qsar

“After that, in the library we dedicated several afternoons to famous people, of different races and religions, who had struggled for peace in different parts of the world. In this context, we presented Br. Charles, with the help of some illustrated poster boards. The children drew colored designs symbolizing the values these different people represented. Once they distinguished who the individuals were, we went into more detail about Br. Charles’ life and explorations in Morocco.

“The children loved the connection, and were particularly impressed to hear how the faith of Muslims left its mark on him for the rest of his life. We could see on their faces that they appreciated the fact that St. Charles had made friends with Tuareg people, had searched out the most



Photo: Daughters of Charity

needy among them and always had something to share: time, conversation, a little food, his own house... and that they in turn had helped him when he got sick and was nearly dying. It became clear that every Christian, every Muslim, every person of any religion who sincerely seeks God, loves God, and is good to other people, will be blessed.

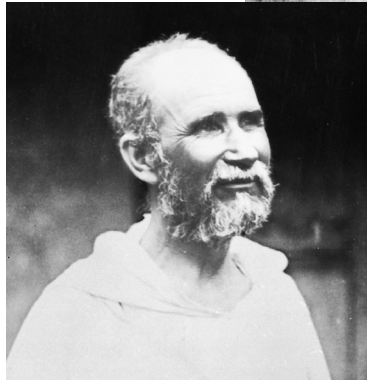
“Following the illustrations on the posters, groups of children read aloud in Arabic about the important highlights in the lives of the different persons. In each group, a girl or boy read the ‘Prayer of Abandonment.’ They could see clearly that it is a Christian prayer, but believers from any religion can identify with the attitude and desire reflected in it.

“Finally, on Friday the 3rd Fr. Emilio, the Apostolic Administrator, came with two Xaverian Brothers for an official celebration. After a meal and time of fellowship we celebrated the Eucharist. It was a powerful moment, sharing the Word of God and celebrating the gift God gave the Church in the person of St. Charles de Foucauld. We know that he loved Morocco. And even though he was never able to come a second time as he would have liked, he’s caring from heaven for its people, from whom he learned so much and who rekindled his desire to return to his own faith.

"When later, the children and adults came for the final gathering, there was a surprise waiting for them: all received T-shirts that said, 'We are the ones who will make a better future.' The library director then led the children in a discussion about brotherhood and sisterhood in our daily lives: in our families, our cities, our countries. They spoke of the treasure of diversity which can help us to seek Unity and of our ability to offer something in service to others.

"We are sure that all the various activities will leave an unforgettable memory in the children as well as the adults.

They have a new friend: Brother Charles."



Snapshots from around the world

(Right) Mass of Thanksgiving at St. John Lateran, Rome. An opera which had been written about Br. Charles' life was performed the evening before.



(Below) At his tomb in El Golea, Algeria



(Below): In the Philippines





The parish Praise Dancers in South Africa began the celebration...



...and there was a procession with Br. Charles' relic in India...

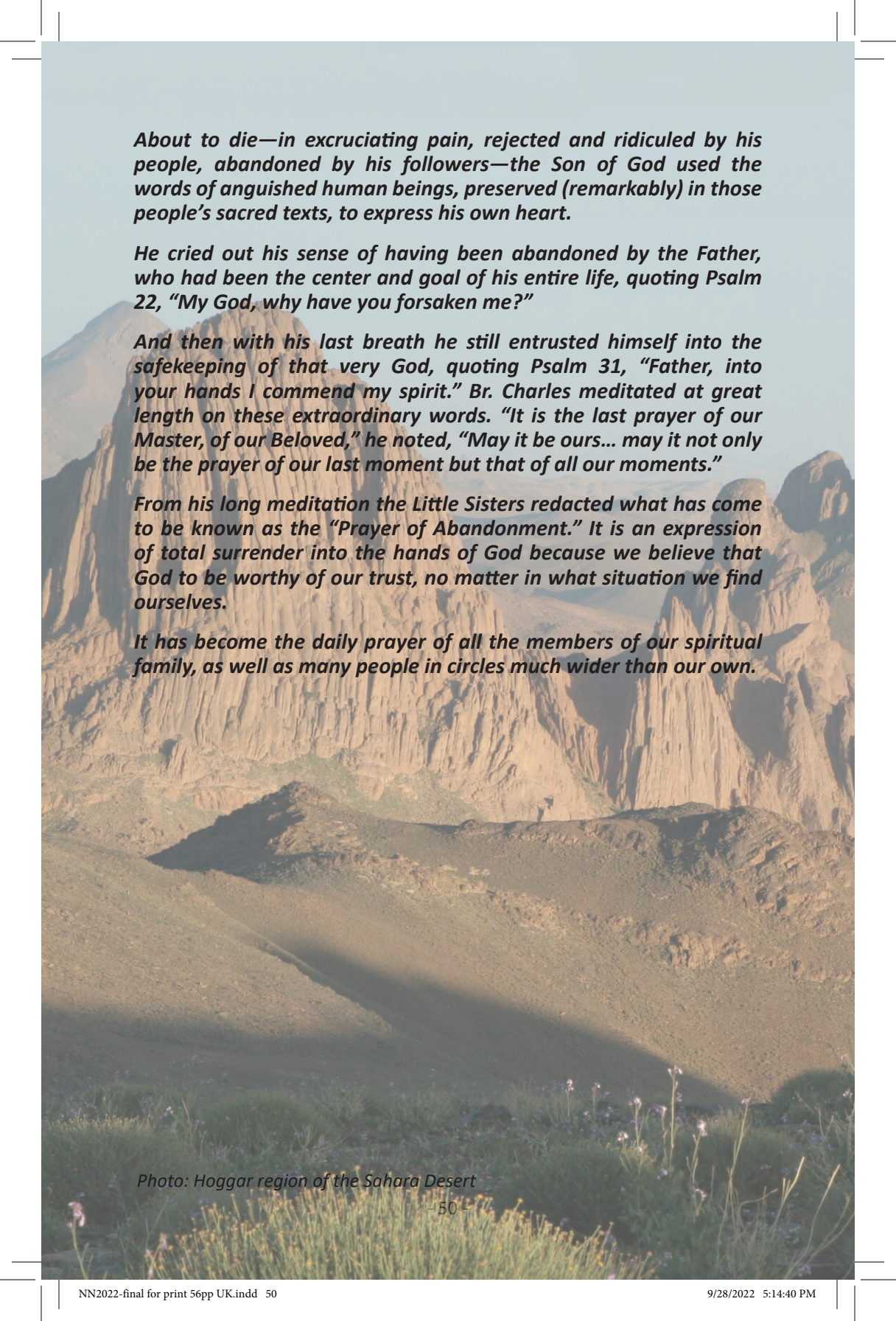
Cameroon: a prayer service in our living room...



... one on one discussions about Br. Charles' life and our Mission.

...and as part of the Church of Hong Kong





About to die—in excruciating pain, rejected and ridiculed by his people, abandoned by his followers—the Son of God used the words of anguished human beings, preserved (remarkably) in those people’s sacred texts, to express his own heart.

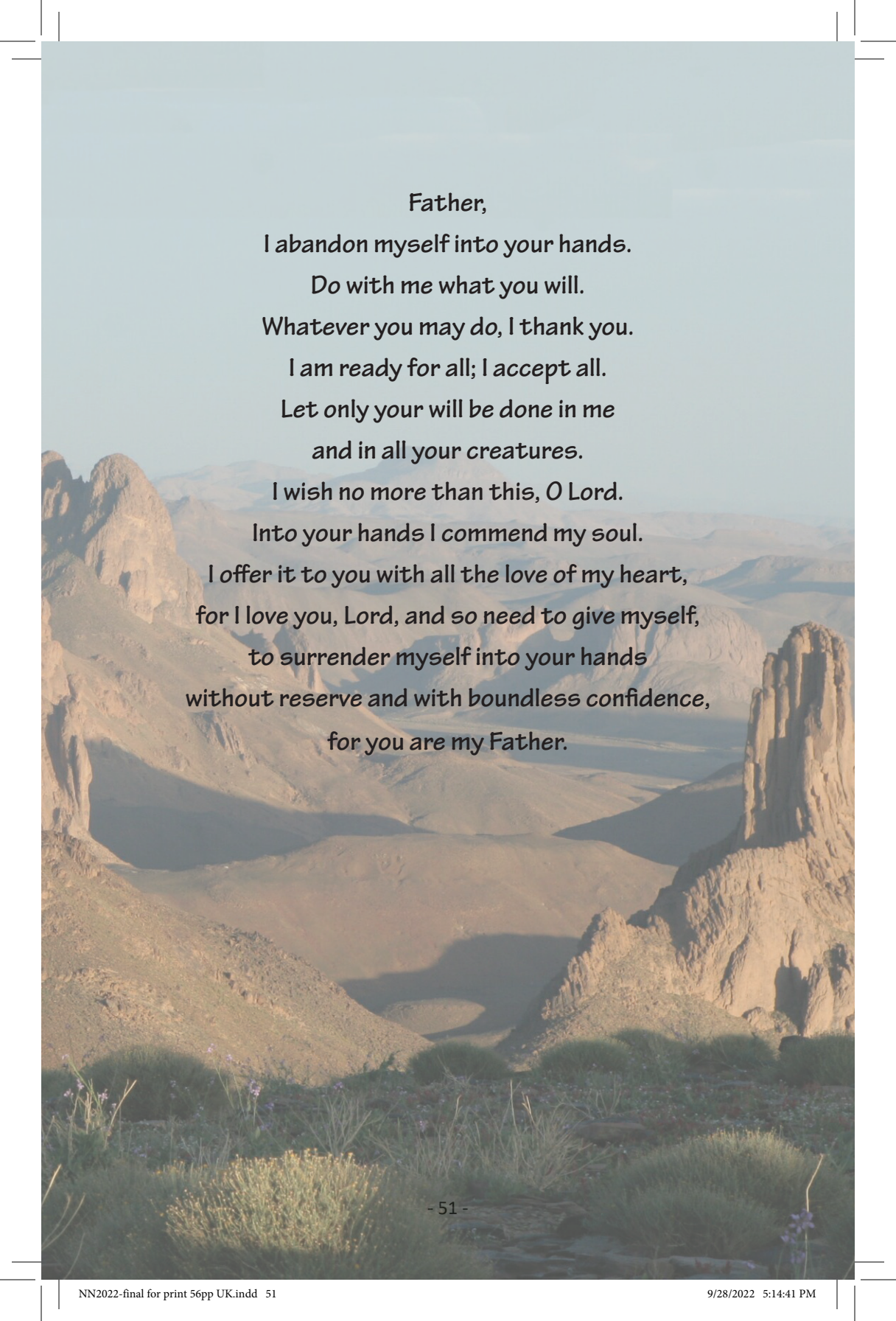
He cried out his sense of having been abandoned by the Father, who had been the center and goal of his entire life, quoting Psalm 22, “My God, why have you forsaken me?”

And then with his last breath he still entrusted himself into the safekeeping of that very God, quoting Psalm 31, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” Br. Charles meditated at great length on these extraordinary words. “It is the last prayer of our Master, of our Beloved,” he noted, “May it be ours... may it not only be the prayer of our last moment but that of all our moments.”

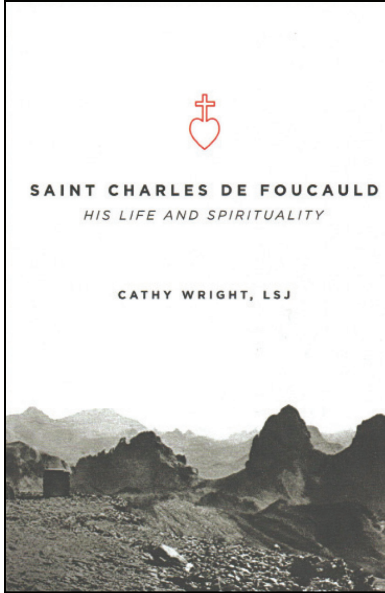
From his long meditation the Little Sisters redacted what has come to be known as the “Prayer of Abandonment.” It is an expression of total surrender into the hands of God because we believe that God to be worthy of our trust, no matter in what situation we find ourselves.

It has become the daily prayer of all the members of our spiritual family, as well as many people in circles much wider than our own.

Photo: Hoggar region of the Sahara Desert

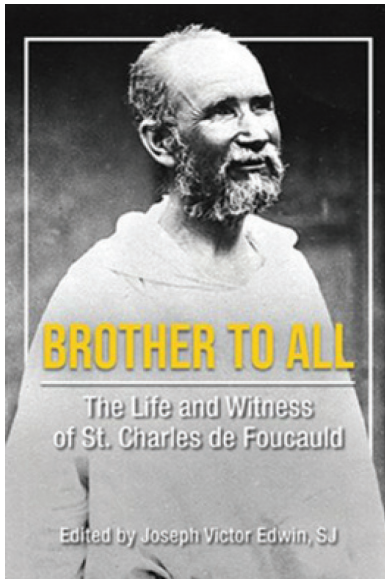


Father,
I abandon myself into your hands.
Do with me what you will.
Whatever you may do, I thank you.
I am ready for all; I accept all.
Let only your will be done in me
and in all your creatures.
I wish no more than this, O Lord.
Into your hands I commend my soul.
I offer it to you with all the love of my heart,
for I love you, Lord, and so need to give myself,
to surrender myself into your hands
without reserve and with boundless confidence,
for you are my Father.



*Saint Charles de Foucauld:
His Life and Spirituality*

by Cathy Wright, LSJ
Pauline Books and Media, 2022
ISBN: 0-8198-9132-0

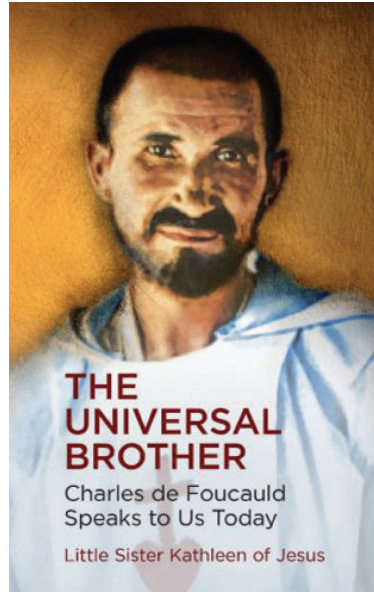


*Brother to All: The Life and Witness
of St. Charles de Foucauld*

by Fr Joseph Victor Edwin, SJ
Orbis Books, 2022
ISBN: 978-1-62698-484-4

NEW!

Three new books on the life and witness of Charles de Foucauld and what his message says for today's world.



*The Universal Brother: Charles
de Foucauld Speaks to Us Today*

by Little Sister Kathleen of Jesus
New City Press, 2019
ISBN: 978-1-56548-646-1

For more information contact: Little Sisters of Jesus

Africa:

P.O. Box 49245
00100 Nairobi G.P.O.
KENYA
tel: 2-55.82.41
dadawadogo@yahoo.com

or

P.O. Box 328
Awka 420001
Anambra State
NIGERIA
tel: 8.03.37.61.873

N. America:

400 N. Streeper St.
Baltimore, MD 21224-1230
U.S.A.
tel: 410-327-7863
lsj.can.usa@gmail.com

Appt 617
1800 rue Bercy
Montreal, Que H2K 4K5
CANADA
514-288-7073

Asia:

Yesu Ashram
Kammanahalli
St. Thomas Town P.O.
Bangalore 560084 Karnataka
INDIA
tel: 80-25.45.30.54
lsjashram@gmail.com

or

21 Alchan St.
1550 Mandaluyong City
PHILIPPINES
tel: (0063) (2) 8534 8328
lsj.phil.76@gmail.com

Europe:

148 Fellows Court
Weymouth Terrace
London E2 8LW
ENGLAND
tel: (00.44) 0207 729.3605
lsjkathy@hotmail.com

Australia:

14/196 Military Road,
Henley Beach S.A. 5022
AUSTRALIA
tel: 08 72251180 or 08 89527139

Our new website can be accessed at:

www.petitessoeursdejesus.eu

for English press the FR button to the left and choose EN

All photos of Br Charles courtesy of the Archives in Viviers, France.

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