



Last week Pope Francis accepted a miracle attributed to Blessed Charles de Foucauld, which has cleared the way for his canonisation.

This news was greeted with joy across the world by all the members of the Charles de Foucauld Family – 19 different groups, consisting of lay people, religious sisters and brothers and priests. All united in their deep commitment to live the Gospel following the charism of Brother Charles as he is known; a way that tries to live in the footsteps of Charles and his beloved master Jesus during his hidden life in Nazareth. A life of friendship to all, especially those people on the margins of society, with a special love for Muslim people.

Yet Charles is the most unlikely of saints. Born into a rich, aristocratic French family in 1858, he had a troubled childhood and adolescence, with many emotional wounds. Orphaned at the age of six, he experienced further losses in his life, finally, when he was 20 his beloved grandfather died. He joined the army, where he led a dissolute life, womanising and squandering his vast fortune and was eventually dismissed, for *'lack of discipline and notorious misconduct'*

An expedition to Morocco, to explore this closed country under the most dangerous of circumstances because Europeans were not welcome there, was the turning point in his life.

Charles discovered and was overwhelmed by the faith of Muslim people, one of whom saved his life during this treacherous journey. He wrote to a friend *"The encounter with Islam caused a profound upheaval in me.....seeing such faith, seeing people living in the continual presence of God, I came to glimpse something greater and more real than worldly occupations. I set about studying Islam and then the Bible"*

Returning to France to great acclaim from the academic community as a renowned explorer, with the love and support of his family, Charles began to uncover the faith of his childhood that had been lost and hidden under all the turmoil of his youth. He began to repeat a strange prayer *'God if you exist make yourself known to me'*.

He finally made a profession of faith having been invited to make his confession to his spiritual guide, Abbé Huvelin. He wrote *"The moment I realized that God existed, I knew that I could not do otherwise than to live for him alone"*.

There followed years of spiritual and physical journeying, he joined the Trappists, but found that their poverty was not harsh enough – he wanted to experience the poverty of simple working people. He lived as a handyman in Nazareth with the Poor Clares, but again was not satisfied and continued his journeying. Eventually he was ordained a priest and settled in a remote settlement in the heart of the Algerian Sahara, a place called Tamanrasset, living amongst a nomadic people, the Tuaregs. He was helped by the friendship of the White Fathers in Algeria – especially Bishop Guerin, with whom he corresponded regularly, seeking help and advice – which he did not always follow!

Despite being a priest there were times when he was unable to celebrate Mass or reserve the Blessed Sacrament as he was often the only Christian in the region, and the Church rules at the time did not allow such solitary celebration. Despite these hardships he spent hours in prayer and reflection on the Gospels, writing many notebooks with his thoughts. He wrote daily letters to his family, especially his cousin, who was his 'soul friend' we would say today. And yet in spite of all this activity he was constantly at the disposal of his beloved neighbours and friends – with an open door to all.

His love was very practical; he lived so closely with the people - listening to their life stories, their problems, their songs and their poetry – that he was able to compile, by hand, the first French-Tuareg dictionary, complete with detailed hand-drawn illustrations, which is still admired today and judged to be a masterful work. He also stood out against the French colonial culture that he had been brought up in by roundly condemning slavery, which was still accepted in the day – he personally ransomed at least two slaves. He challenged others, including the French military people who patrolled the area, saying *'We have no right to be 'sleeping watchmen' or dumb watch-dogs. Whenever we see evil we must sound the alarm.'*

He wrote something that challenges us today *"There is one case when we must resist evil forcefully. It is when it is not a case of defending ourselves, but of protecting others. It takes forcefulness to defend the weak and the innocent when their oppressors wrong them. The spirit of peace is not a spirit of weakness but a spirit of strength"*.

Charles was shot in the midst of tribal unrest in the Sahara in 1916. He died without having made any converts, without any followers, and yet he had truly evangelised a whole people – in the sense that he had radiated the love of God to everyone he met, to all his friends amongst the Tuareg people whom he loved so much and who loved him in return .

Charles' life and witness speaks powerfully to us today as a way of living out our Christian commitment and desire to follow Jesus– about a 'hidden' life of friendship and closeness to all, especially those people on the edges of our societies, those who are rejected and seen as 'nothing'. He would love our 'discovery' during the present Covid-19 crisis, that those people who have traditionally been seen as of little worth, paid minimum wages– cleaners, bus drivers, delivery drivers, care assistants, refuse collectors , shop assistants– are indeed the most precious people in our societies after all – without whom our world would collapse.

Charles wished for all people of all religions, and none, to live in peace, he wrote *'I want all the people here, Christians, Muslims, Jews, non-believers, to look on me as their brother, the universal brother'*

Near the end of his life, Brother Charles said: *"I think that there is no passage of the Gospel that has made a deeper impression on me or changed my life more than this one: "Whatever you do to one of these little ones, you do it to me." If we think of it, that these are the words of Uncreated Truth, words from the mouth that said, "This is my body... this is my blood..." then how forcefully we are impelled to seek Jesus and love him in the "little ones".*

Charles would also sympathise with our present 'drought' – our inability to be physically present in Church before the Blessed Sacrament, to celebrate the Eucharist together – he suffered so much because of his own lack – and yet he lived a truly eucharistic life with his 'chosen' people, sharing everything with them, holding them in his heart and presenting them daily in prayer to his beloved brother Jesus and his Father. A lesson for us?

Writing in The Tablet earlier this week Christopher Lamb says, *"The soon to be St Charles de Foucauld will be interceding in heaven for a humbler Church, less focussed on the appearances of success and more on becoming a model of dialogue and charity."*

This is Br Charles' special prayer and one which speaks powerfully to us at this time:

Prayer of Abandonment

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

If you want to know more about Br Charles you might like to follow this link on face book
https://m.facebook.com/story/grahql_permalink/?graphql_id=UzpfSTE3MzcxMjY2OTMyMTAwODpWSzo2Mzg2OTUyMTAxODk1NDM%3D

By chance last week a special evening service was broadcast from St Martin in the Fields. The service was taken by the Rev Catherine Duce who gave a powerful reflection on the life of Br Charles (at 14 minutes), she named 'three F's' in Charles' life – faith, friendship and failure! If these words speak to you, especially the last one – follow this up! You will not be disappointed....

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