



Desert Creek House
802 Desert Creek Road - Numbugga
BEGA - NSW 2550 - AUSTRALIA

Phone/Fax: ++61 (0)2 6492 8498
E-mail: yumorsier@optusnet.com.au

2nd September 2006

Contemplation with Charles de Foucauld

Song: Taos Amrouche

Prayer: Move among us o God

Charles de Foucauld: some biographical notes

Charles de Foucauld was born in France in 1858, in Strasbourg.

He is orphaned when he is six and his grandparents adopt him with his sister who is 3 years younger. The grandfather is Colonel in the French Army. Charles receives a religious education but loses faith a few years after his first communion.

He is trained by Jesuits until he enters a military school to become an officer. When he is 22, he is sent to Algeria which is a French colony, but he resigns from the army 2 years later because he wants to travel. First he goes to Morocco where he travelled, clandestinely, hiding as a rabbi. Then he visits South Algeria and Tunisia, i.e. the northern Sahara. The experience of the army will play a very important role in his future life, because through it he has his first contact with the colonies and with other cultures. His travels give him the opportunity to discover what poverty, contempt and marginalisation are. The book he writes about his experience in Morocco becomes a reference on this topic.

He returns to France when he is 28. In Paris he reconnects with the Church and wants to be taught about religion but his teacher wants him to look into his own life. It brings him to conversion the same year. "Through which miracle did the infinite mercy of God bring me back from so far?" he wrote later.

With the purpose of seeing clearer the will of God concerning his life, he makes a pilgrimage to the Holy Land where he follows the path of Jesus in his hidden life in Nazareth, and decides to become a Trappist monk in Syria. After 3 years, he takes his temporary vows but revokes them before he had to confirm them, because he feels he has to go his own way. He makes his own vows of chastity and poverty and becomes the servant of the Poor Clares in Nazareth. Although his idea is to work and be the servant, he has indeed a lot of free time for contemplation. His path seems to him to be one of poverty and of the imitation of Jesus. He chooses as motto *Jesus Caritas*, i.e. Jesus is love, with the sign of a heart surmounted by a cross. He is ordained a priest in 1901.

This time marks the beginning of his commitment to live in the Sahara where he wants to follow the example of the hidden life of Jesus in Nazareth. First he settles down in Beni Abbes, in western Algeria, hoping to establish a fraternity in Morocco which he knew already, but it does not seem possible. He has written a rule for the "Little Brother of the Sacred Heart", his hoped-for fraternity, but in fact this fraternity never comes about. He has nevertheless the opportunity to travel to South Algeria, i.e. Central Sahara, to Tamanrasset which is one of the most remote places he could reach.

In the mountains there live some nomad tribes, called the Tuaregs. In 1905 - he is 47 - he settles down in the Hoggar - that is the name of these mountains. It seems that he finds there really the place where he can answer his deep vocation of sharing with poor people of another culture their way of life, while remaining himself, a European and a Christian. He wants to become the universal brother, i.e. to be accepted as a trustful and loving brother. He does not want to be a missionary. He only wants to live his poor life and be a sign of love among other people.

For many years he studies the language of the Tuaregs as well as their poetry and their customs. He writes a dictionary French - Tuareg with the purpose of making the relationship between Tuareg and European culture easier, and thereby promoting links of love and human fellowship.

But World War I breaks out. It is a time of trouble in the colonies where some tribes of this region take the opportunity of rebelling against the colonial power and practising lawlessness. A group of rebels seizes Charles in 1916. A young 15 year old guard who is in charge of him panics when two soldiers appear suddenly and kills him. Charles was 58.

Since then, Charles de Foucauld has become an inspiration for many brothers and sisters: the Little Brothers and Sisters of Jesus, who throughout the whole world share their life with the poorest without any intention of converting them. They wish just to be signs of love and of the presence of a loving and life-giving God.

Music: Sandstorm

Four aspects I found inspiring

Among the many fascinating aspects of Charles de Foucauld's life, I have chosen four aspects which seem especially inspiring for us:

- 1) the imitation of Jesus Christ,
- 2) the love for God and the adoration of the Eucharist
- 3) the brotherly love and the power of intercession
- 4) the discovery of other cultures and living presence among others

As Charles lived some 100 years ago, we have to interpret his life in relation to the cultural context of his time (this was the time of colonisation) to be able to see what seems so new and inspiring in his way of life.

1) Imitation of Jesus Christ

It is interesting to note that Charles de Foucauld needed a lot of time to find his own vocation. He was already 28 years old when he had his conversion (1886). He spent almost 10 years (until 1896) as a monk before it was clear to him that he should go his own way, which was the imitation of Jesus. He stayed a long time with the Poor Clares in Nazareth until he noticed it was a too comfortable way of life. It became clear for him that he felt called to go to the Sahara (in 1900). It is only in 1905 (by then he is 47) that he settles down in Tamanrasset (South Algeria). For almost all of his life, he hoped to create a fraternity, a place for sharing with other brothers, but this only happened after his death. I find very encouraging for us to see how such an inspiring man had also to struggle to find his way. He was very motivated and ready to let go of all his privileges, nevertheless it was not so easy to hear clearly what God wanted him to do. Listening to God is certainly not a passive attitude. It is like riding a bike, or like a boat in the stream; you have to set it into motion before you can steer it. Our spiritual life is not something we have to achieve, but it is a

growth, it is a transformation of ourselves in the present time. It is a process in which there are no simple recipes.

After his conversion in 1886, Charles went to the Holy Land for a pilgrimage, seeking what God wanted him to do. This place always attracted him as being the place where Jesus lived, where God made himself humble and poor to be revealed to humanity. Charles wanted to imitate Jesus in the most humble aspects of his life: poverty, work, obscurity, retreat, submission, penance... without any security, only listening to and trusting in God; not knowing what tomorrow will be. Trust in God is his only security.

In our Christian life, there are two aspects which we should seek to match one with another:

- 1) Faith: We may believe in the teaching of Jesus Christ, be committed to God in our spirit and in our heart, but nevertheless continue to live like other people do, i.e. according to the secular way of life, while doing our best to practice the Christian values of love and generosity and to deepen our life of prayer. We can call this way: **believing in God but acting according to the logic of this world**. That is the choice most of us make. More than a choice for being, it is a choice for doing. It is based on a contradiction: we are only ready to let go of what does not compromise our basic material and psychological security which we find in the world.
- 2) Practice: We can have faith (as in 1) but also try to conform our way of life, more and more completely, with our faith in God. It means then to live with God as only security, and no longer be bound by the rules of the world. We can call this way **the life in God according to the logic of God**.

The imitation of Christ means: having no belongings, no insurance, no work, no income, no money, no fixed abode, no social status. It means choosing the poor, the marginal, the sick; being like the flowers growing in the fields and the birds in the sky, without worrying about the next day. It means listening to God and doing His will, i.e. not knowing what we do tomorrow, what we will eat, where we will be... it frightens, even terrifies us, doesn't it?!

It is what Charles de Foucauld means by doing penance. It is the same expression that John the Baptist uses when he calls people to "repent because the kingdom of heaven is close at hand" (Mt 3:2). Doing penance is not about physical or mental mortification because of our sins, but it is about changing our way of looking at life. The word *repent* (metanoia) means in Greek *changing one's mind*. It means it is about a radical change in our life, a revolution. Faith should bring us to a practice which accepts God as only security. Faith should bring this radical change of mind. Without this deep change of mind, there is no lively faith. It is why doing penance is necessary for imitating Jesus. We cannot be faithful to God if we don't trust Him 100%. We cannot say to God: YES BUT... It would be denying Him. Jesus did not say: YES BUT... Doing penance is a deep change of our inner being. When we trust God completely, we don't need anything else but Him. It does not mean we will not suffer, but it means that we will always be connected to our Source of life, and we will learn to focus on the real meaning of life, letting go everything which is not necessary. We must learn to look at the spiritual meaning of the events in our life, beyond the material aspects and become able to trust the real growth in us even when the material situation seems so poor. Our physical life, although sometimes so painful, is only a minor aspect of our life. What matters is the spiritual dimension. Between faith alone and faith and practice, there is a tremendous revolution, a deep transformation of our heart.

Texts

Questions:

We propose we have a time of personal reflection about our way of life. Go out for a walk and try to answer in your heart the following questions:

- What prevents my faith to lead me to a life with God as only security?
- How can I help it mature?
- How can I learn to read the spiritual dimension of my life, beyond the material illusions?

We meet here in 20 min.

Sharing

2) The love for God and the adoration of the Eucharist

I find fascinating how for Charles de Foucauld the source of his choices and of his way of life is not in his own will but in contemplation. Every day, he spends hours in the chapel contemplating the Eucharist. You can feel how it really is a love story between him and God. Jesus is the Spouse, the Beloved. He is the only source of life for him. He is the doer.

The Eucharist is the centre of our life as a real experience of the presence of Christ among us, every day of our life. Our consciousness of this presence transforms our life. This presence is the real acting force in our life. Out of it flows love. Only this love can change us and help us to act in the world.

Prayer: So near to me

Texts

Questions:

- What is the place of contemplation in my life?
- How can it become the core of my relationship with God; a relationship of joy and love?

Lets have a time of silence. Concentrate on your breathing. Let this presence of God penetrate you without any expectation. Let it be as it is.

I ring the bell in 10 min.

We can have now a time of adoration: each of you can express her or his gratitude to God, and say words of adoration.

Sharing

TEA BREAK

3) The brotherly love and the power of intercession

Charles has a deep love for his neighbour. He also has a lot of respect for what is different in the other. He sees his influence on the other more through the grace of God than through his own actions. He says he does not want to teach or to preach unless he is commanded to. His way is to be just a witness to God's love.

The attitude of the heart is the most important; he believes his own love will act more powerfully than anything else. Charles dreams to be the brother of all. He is keen to welcome anybody, good or bad, known or unknown. He believes really in the powerful strength of love for changing the heart of people. Being together, being with others, working with them is really the way to make Jesus' presence real and visible.

The inner attitude is also an attitude of prayer. Being a contemplative, Charles believes in the power of prayer. We should pray for the other, but we should pray in a way where we do not impose our will. The main prayer is: Your Will be done! Intercession is a way to ask for the Will of God to be done. It is not a way to satisfy our hopes and wishes, it is really a way to surrender to God's Will. We must pray with all the love we are capable of, with all the passion we can express.

Very often we pray for the healing of the sick and we do well to do so. We think that healing means to recover health as soon as possible. But may be health is not always what we think it is. Health has for us a very precise and reduced medical meaning, because we see before all what is visible for our eyes, i.e. what is material and physical. We do not see how health is first of all a spiritual dynamic, more important than our physical state. Our soul and spirit are eternal, while our body is mortal. But our body is very important, because it is like a book that tells us what we are and why we suffer. We have to learn how to read in this marvellous book. It is important to listen to our body and to take great care of it. It is pointing to something more important than our immediate health, but which cannot be described by words: it tries to tell us something about the expression of our own vocation, about our relationship with God. It is difficult for us to pray as we do not know what to ask for. Some people become ill and suffer a lot, but through this very difficult time they may grow tremendously. We all grow more through suffering than when we feel well. It does not mean we have to look for suffering, but when suffering happens we have to consider it very seriously, like an opportunity to grow spiritually.

What does intercession mean?

Prayer: Surrender Prayer

Texts

Questions:

We propose to have a time of intercession. Let us make it an experience how we can be involved with our whole heart yet remain open to the will of God. Feel free to express what you want to. Please leave some time between two petitions, so that each of us can really stay with each petition for some time.

Sharing

4) The discovery of other cultures and the presence among others

The first contacts Charles de Foucauld had with North African cultures happened in 1880 when he was a young 22 years old officer. It was the time of colonisation. Europe had little consideration for African people. They were considered as undeveloped and it seemed to be the duty of European civilisation to make them more civilised. We forget completely that the white man conquered these territories because he had ships and better weapons, and not because he was wiser. Colonisation happened through violence. It is important to remember that, because we must interpret Charles' sensitivity to these other cultures in the context of that time. Charles speaks of infidels when he speaks of Muslims. It is certainly a very paternalistic attitude, but his way to live with Arabs, Berbers and Touaregs, without trying to be a missionary and without trying to teach them his faith is remarkable. It is, for his time, a complete revolution in the attitude towards these other cultures. He was very conscious that his role was to be a bridge beyond the differences. He first had to become their "brother", by sharing their way of life rather than imposing his own, yet remaining what he was: a European and a Christian. It no longer was colonisation, but a deep search of knowing the other and a long effort of listening to these people.

Texts

Prayer: God, who gave this land its shape

Questions:

- How do we consider other cultures?
- How can we leave space for aboriginal people to be themselves?
- How can we create links with them?
- How can we really become brothers and sisters with them, in their and our country?

We propose first a time of silence, trying to feel what this question means in the deepest part of us. Then we can share about this theme. I ring the bell in 5 min.

Sharing

Closing prayer