



Abbaye Saint-Joseph de Clairval

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January 25, 2006  
Conversion of Saint Paul

Dear Friend of Saint Joseph Abbey,

**A** YOUNG man stepped into a confessional in Saint Augustine's Church in Paris, leaned towards the priest, and said, "Father, I do not have faith. Please teach me." The priest fixed his eyes on him... "Kneel down and confess to God, you will believe!"—"But, I didn't come for that..."—"Confess!" The man who came for faith understood that it was forgiveness that would bring him light. He knelt down and confessed his entire life. When the penitent had received absolution for his sins, the priest went on, "Are you fasting?"—"Yes."—"Go to communion!" At once the young man approached the holy table—this was his "second first Communion"... It was late October 1886. This priest, well known for his spiritual direction, was Father Huvelin. The young man, 28 years old, was Charles de Foucauld.

Born September 15, 1858 in Strasbourg into a very Christian family, Charles lost his mother, then his father, in the same year, 1864. He was then entrusted, along with his only sister, Marie, to the care of his grandfather, Monsieur de Morlet, a retired colonel. Affectionate, passionate, and studious, Charles was spoiled by his grandfather, who responded to the boy's fits of anger with indulgence, considering them a sign of character. Monsieur de Morlet and the two children moved to Nancy in 1872. At that point Charles began mixing his studies with all sorts of readings chosen without discernment. At the end of his school years, he lost all faith, "and that was not my only sin," he would later admit... "Children are thrown into the world without being given the weapons necessary to fight the host of enemies they will find both within and outside of themselves. Christian philosophers resolved, so long ago and so clearly, all the questions that every young man feverishly asks himself, without suspecting that the answers are right there, luminous and clear, just a step away!" He would later insist that his nephews have Christian teachers: "I never had a bad teacher, but youth must be taught not by neutrals, but by faith-filled and holy souls, who moreover know how to give the reason for their beliefs and inspire young people with a firm confidence in the truth of their faith..."

### ***All impiety, all desire for evil***

Graduated from high school, curious about everything, determined to enjoy himself and yet sad, Charles left for Paris to prepare for the Saint-Cyr military academy. He would later say of himself that he was all egoism, all vanity, all impiety, all desire for evil... His laziness was such that he was expelled in his second year... All the same, he was admitted to the school in 1876, one of the last in his class. In 1878, he went on to the

cavalry school in Saumur, where he lived, a friend said, "the pleasant life of the Epicurean philosopher": Charles lived it up, dressed in great style, and held one party after another. His uncle voiced his opinion about this and gave him a legal advisor, to the nephew's great anger. In 1880, Second Lieutenant de Foucauld left with his regiment for Algeria. A young woman joined him there, presenting herself as his lawful wife. When his superiors realized the truth, they asked him to send his companion back to France. Charles absolutely refused. The punishment was immediate — suspension for insubordination and misconduct. Then the Algerian Muslim leader Bou-Amama's insurrection began. Foucauld could not bear the thought that his friends were going to battle, to honor and danger, without him. He obtained permission to rejoin the regiment. "In the midst of the dangers and deprivations of the colonial expeditions," one of his friends, General Laperrine, would say, "he proved himself a soldier and a leader..."

He was twenty-four years old. He was attracted by the silence of the North African countries, the wide-open spaces, the unpredictable and primitive way of life, the mysteriousness of the inhabitants... He resigned from the army and set off on a most difficult expedition—to explore Morocco, a country at the time still very closed, especially to Christians. Accompanied by a Moroccan-born Jewish rabbi and passing himself off as a rabbi, too, Charles crossed the border in June 1883. For eleven months, he criss-crossed Morocco. A number of surveying instruments, hidden in the folds of his garments, allowed him, at the constant risk of being caught, to make observations and take notes on this still unexplored country. In May 1884, he returned to France loaded with scientific data which he wrote up in a book, *Reconnaissance au Maroc*, that immediately gained him great respect in scientific circles.

His family welcomed him with joy and affection. They knew his excesses and his state of mind, but did not reproach him. On the contrary, they congratulated him on the success of his adventure and put him in contact with the most select company, carefully chosen for its quality of mind and Christian convictions. Charles had been deeply affected by what he had seen in North Africa, and especially the continual invocation of God. All of the religious aspects of Muslim life led him to say to himself, "And me with no religion!" He even imagined becoming Muslim but, even at first glance, it seemed to him that the religion of Mohammed could not be true, because it was "too materialistic." In spite of the pleasant life he was leading, his sadness only grew. In his free time, he looked at the books of pagan philosophers. Their answers seemed weak...

### ***No one has been able to take it from Him....***

And so it was that, providentially, Charles met Father Huvelin one evening in 1886 at his Aunt Moytessier's home. This man of God's affection for sinners touched even the most indifferent; he thought of their final hour when they would be judged, condemned forever. This particular evening, the two men exchanged small talk, but Providence was bringing about the confession that would effect a total change in Foucauld's life. In November 1888, Charles left for the Holy Land which he traveled through for four months. Nazareth above all appealed to him—it inspired in him an enduring love for the hidden life, obedience, the lowly condition freely chosen. For he thought of Him who had lived there for thirty years, and of whom Father Huvelin had said, "Our Lord so took the lowest place that no one has been able to take it from Him." After his return, three retreats helped him to discern his vocation—God was calling him to be a Trappist monk. He gave away all his possessions and set out, at the end of 1889, for the Trappist monastery of Our Lady of the Snows, in Ardeche (France). On January 26, 1890, the Father Abbot clothed him with the habit and gave him the name Brother Alberic.

At thirty-two years of age, he adapted effortlessly to the rules of the monastery. The only thing that was difficult for his proud nature was obedience. In his struggles, he was sustained by his initial intention: "I wanted to enter religious life to keep Our Lord company in His sufferings... JESUS is taking me by the hand, placing me in His peace, chasing away the sadness as soon as it tries to draw near." On June 27, 1890, Brother Alberic fulfilled a plan about which he had spoken to his Abbot from the day of his arrival: to join a very poor monastery in Syria, the Trappist monastery of Akbes, so as to live there unknown, even poorer, and to be close to the Holy Land where the Son of God had suffered and worked. There, the monks lived in the midst of a population made up of

Kurds, Syrians, Turks, and Armenians, who would be, he wrote, "a brave, hard-working, and honest people, if they were instructed, governed, and above all, converted... It is our responsibility to build the future of these peoples. The future, the only real future, is eternal life. This life is only the short test that prepares us for the other... Preaching in Muslim countries is difficult, but over so many centuries missionaries have overcome plenty of other difficulties... Let us give them the example of a perfect life, of a better and divine life."

In 1892, a few months after taking his vows, Brother Alberic received the order to begin theological studies for the priesthood. In spite of the "extreme repugnance" he felt for everything that distanced him from the lowest place that he had come for, he set to work. At the same time, he explained to the Father Abbot General the persistent attraction he felt for an even poorer way of life, outside the Cistercian order. The Father Abbot sent him to Rome for two years of studies. Obedient, Brother Alberic arrived there in October 1896. However, the following January, the Abbot General gave him permission to leave the Trappist order to follow God's call.

### ***"I was infinitely happy"***

Brother Charles of JESUS—the name he gave himself from then on—then returned to Nazareth. The Poor Clare nuns took him on as a servant. "I was infinitely happy to be poor, clothed as a laborer, in the same lowly condition as JESUS..." He spent long hours in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament. One day, he let these words of gratitude escape from his heart: "My God, we all must sing Your mercies, all of us created for eternal glory and redeemed by the Blood of JESUS, by Your Blood, my Lord JESUS, Who are beside me in this tabernacle. But if we all must, how much more so I, who have been since childhood enveloped by so many graces, son of a holy mother, having learned from her to know You, to love You and to pray to You as soon as I could speak! And the catechisms, the first confessions... the examples of piety received in my family... and after a long and good preparation, that First Communion!..."

"When, despite so many graces, I began to stray from You, with what sweetness You called me back to You through my grandfather's voice, with what mercy You kept me from falling into the worst excesses by preserving my tenderness for him in my heart!... But despite all that, alas, I distanced myself, I distanced myself more and more from You, my Lord and my life... and so my life began to be a death, or rather it was already a death in Your eyes... And in this state of death, You still preserved me—all faith had gone, but respect and regard for religion remained intact..."

“Through circumstances You made me stay chaste, and soon, at the end of the winter of 1886, having brought me back to my family in Paris, chastity became for me a sweetness and a need of my heart. It was You Who did that, my God, You alone ; I, alas, was for nothing in it ! It was necessary to prepare my soul for the Truth. The demon is too much master of an unchaste soul to allow the Truth to enter it... You, my God, could not enter a soul where the demon of impure passions reigns as master... My God, how will I sing Your mercies !...

“A beautiful soul was assisting You, but through its silence, its gentleness, its perfection. It allowed itself to be seen, it was good and emitted its alluring fragrance, but it did not act. You, my JESUS, my Savior, You did everything inside as well as outside. So you gave me four graces. The first was to inspire me with the thought that since this soul was so intelligent, the Religion that it believed in so firmly could not be the madness I first thought. The second was to inspire me with this next thought : since this Religion is not madness, perhaps Truth is on earth in no other religion, nor in any other philosophical system, but this one ? The third was to tell me to then study this Religion, to take a teacher for Catholicism, a learned priest, and see what there is in it. The fourth was the incomparable grace of introducing me to Father Huvelin... And since then, my God, it has been nothing but a series of graces... A rising tide, always rising !”

### ***One Mass more each day***

Brother Charles' reputation for holiness spread unbeknownst to him. The Abbess of the Poor Clares in Jerusalem urged him to prepare for the priesthood. To overcome his resistance, she pointed out that if he did, there would be one more Mass in the world every day. If he had received gifts, were they for himself alone ? This argument got to him—a reply from Father Huvelin did the rest. Brother Charles returned to Our Lady of the Snows in France where he prepared for his ordination which took place on June 9, 1900. What would he do now ? With the consent of the Bishop of Viviers and Father Huvelin, he would go to bring the Gospel to the peoples of the Sahara, whom he considered to be among the most abandoned...

From then on, Father Charles of JESUS's life took place in the desert—first at Beni-Abbes, in the southern Oran, then in Tamanrasset, in the Hoggar Mountains, 1,500 km south of Algiers. He knew that he was certainly the first priest to ever live in and celebrate the Holy Mass in these places. His purpose was to open the hearts of the Muslims—Arabs, then Tuaregs—by bringing them into contact with Christian civilization and with a priest, so that they could later be evangelized by missionaries in the ordinary sense of the word. He showed them a great and selfless charity, speaking to them about God and teaching them the precepts of natural religion.

It has been claimed that Father de Foucauld did not preach the faith in any way, and limited himself to being a silent presence in the midst of the Muslims. This already annoyed General Laperine, who noted in his journal : “What about his conversation ! And his dress !” When anyone arrived at the door of his hermitage, Brother Charles would appear, wrapped in a white caftan, on which was sewn a red heart surmounted by a cross, his eyes full of serenity and his hand outstretched. The image of the Sacred Heart proclaimed the faith of this white man, and his whole life revealed the Gospel. The natives made no mistake about it. In a report to the Apostolic Prefect for the Sahara, Brother Charles wrote, “For the slaves (slavery being then a common practice in the desert), I have a little room where I gather them together... ; little by little, I am teaching them to pray to JESUS... Poor travelers also find humble refuge and a poor meal at the Fraternity, with a warm welcome and a few words to incline them to goodness and to JESUS...” He wrote to a friend : “I am cut to the heart when I see children from the town set off in search of adventure, with no trade, no education, no religious instruction... A few good Sisters of Charity would, in a short time and with God's help, give this whole country to JESUS.”

### ***A cure for sadness***

For a long time, he had dreamed of gathering a community around himself—the “Little Brothers of the Sacred Heart of JESUS,” missionaries who would make JESUS known and loved through a life of prayer, charity, and poverty, led among these vast tribes who did not know the one Savior. He nevertheless wrote, “Right now I am in a state of great peace. This will last as long as JESUS wants. I have the Blessed Sacrament, and the love of JESUS. Others have the earth, I have the good Lord... When I am sad, here is my cure : I say the glorious mysteries of the Rosary, and I tell myself, ‘After all, what difference does it make if I am poor, and nothing comes of the good I hope for ? None of that keeps our beloved JESUS—Who wants the good a thousand times more than I—from being blessed, eternally and infinitely blessed !...’”

When the First World War (1914-18) broke out in Europe, Father Charles had been settled in the Hoggar Mountains for nine years. Of the six Tuareg tribes in the midst of which he lived, three had submitted themselves to France and remained loyal to it, but the others took advantage of the European conflict to inspire the people with the spirit of rebellion. They knew the hermit's great influence over the Tuaregs of Hoggar. “Tamanrasset's great interest,” wrote a French doctor in January 1914, “is Father de Foucauld's presence. Through his goodness, holiness, and skill, he has gained great reputation among the people.” He became the target of rebels

who organized an attack. On December 1, 1916, they silently approached the small fort where he lived and knocked on the door which the hermit trustingly opened : he was then seized and tied up. Understanding what was happening, he waited for death. Finally the moment so longed for, of joining the Beloved had come! "Let us endure all insults," he had written, "blows, wounds, and death, in praying for those who hate us... following JESUS' example, for no other reason than to show JESUS that we love Him."

Surprised by two soldiers loyal to France, the attackers panicked. The one guarding Father Charles shot him point-blank in the head. The priest slowly slid down the wall and collapsed. Father Charles de Foucauld was dead, a victim of his loving zeal for these peoples in whom the light of faith had never shone. He had dedicated his life to making known to them the true God incarnate in JESUS CHRIST, to enabling them to experience the mercy from which he himself had benefited so dramatically, and of which, from gratitude, he wanted to be the herald. It was only on December 21 that Captain de La Roche, the commanding officer for the Hoggar region, was able to get to Tamanrasset. On the priest's tomb he planted a wooden cross. Then he entered into the fortified hermitage that the bandits had pillaged. He recovered Father Charles' rosary, stations of the cross he had delicately drawn in pen and ink on small boards, and a wooden cross that also bore a very beautiful image of Christ...

### **Monstrance in the sand**

In disturbing the soil with his foot, the young officer uncovered a tiny monstrance in the sand that still contained the Sacred Host. He reverently picked it up,

With his burning love for JESUS in the Eucharist, Brother Charles anticipated the call that the Servant of God John Paul II would send forth to the whole Church a century later : "Dear brothers and sisters... Here is the Church's treasure... In the Eucharist we have JESUS, we have His redemptive sacrifice, we have His resurrection, we have the gift of the Holy Spirit, we have adoration, obedience and love of the Father. Were we to disregard the Eucharist, how could we overcome our own deficiency? ... In the humble signs of bread and wine, changed into His Body and Blood, Christ walks beside us as our strength and our food for the journey, and He enables us to become, for everyone, witnesses of hope" (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, April 17, 2003, nos. 59, 60, 62).

Charles de Foucauld, who was beatified in Rome last November 13<sup>th</sup>, loved the Eucharist as though he saw Christ present in it with his own eyes. Let us ask him to light in our souls an ever-greater love for Him who wishes to remain in our midst as our confidant, our support, our true and faithful Friend.

*Dom Antoine Marie o.s.b.*

*P. S. This monthly letter is free of charge. We gratefully accept the addresses of other persons who may enjoy receiving it.*

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