

III Priesthood – Beni Abbes

The Fraternity

We saw where that the word “little” comes from Br Charles’ desire to follow Jesus down to Nazareth. But the word *brother* expresses the apostolic dimension of Nazareth.

Even if he was no longer a Trappist, the community received him for a year in order to prepare him for the priesthood. They undertook all the necessary steps, getting in touch with the Bishop of Viviers, Mgr Bonnet and explaining Br Charles’ case to them. At 42 years old, he had absorbed enough theology that he no longer needed courses, but he had to go through the minor orders that led to the diaconate and ordination.

He begins his retreat before diaconate with a quote from St John regarding imitation. *We can be sure that we are in God only when the one who claims to be living in him is living the same kind of life as Christ lived.* Jesus’ name means God saves, His name is his mission. To imitate Jesus is to enter into his work as Saviour.

There is a very sponsal accent to this retreat. Drawing on the story of Esther in the OT, he compares the stages that lead to ordination to the rights that the Betrothed receives to progressively enter into contact with the body of the Beloved. At first she is only allowed into his presence, later she is allowed to touch him on certain occasions and later still she obtains full rights. He is overwhelmed with the thought that he will be allowed to touch the Eucharist. To touch the body, be allowed close to the body of the beloved. He integrates his sexuality in his approach to the Eucharist. Besides he often uses words like the Spouse, the Beloved. It’s something that keeps his love young.

All of his retreats end with a discernment which he calls an election. This one is centred on the future foundation of the little *brothers* (no longer *hermits*) of the Sacred Heart of Jesus » This change is significant and he will go over his rule, scratching out the word *Hermits* and replacing it with *Little Brothers*.

The meaning behind this change in name becomes clearer when you look at his retreat before ordination. It is centred on three quotes from the NT:

I abandon myself into your hands.

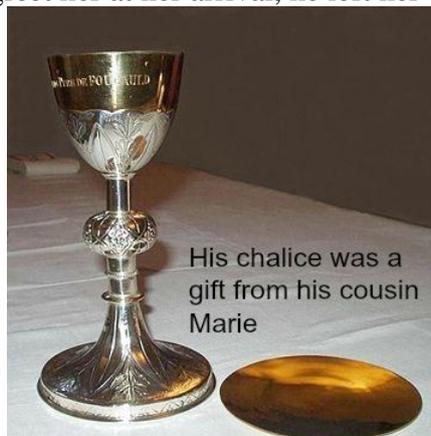
I have come to bring fire on earth (When there’s a fire you have to act quickly. Love is always in a hurry. At the Visitation Mary set out in haste)

He came to seek out and save what was lost (by going to the poorest) When he speaks of imitation now the accent isn’t on imitating Jesus who goes down, but on imitating him in his mission to the poorest, bringing the banquet to those who were furthest away.

In returning to Our Lady of the Snows he wished to receive ordination so that he could then return to the Mount of Beatitudes and start the hermits of the Sacred heart. But the Gospel indicated that he need go elsewhere... *Not to that place where the land is holiest, but where people are in the greatest need.* For Brother Charles the desire to become a priest cannot be separated from the idea of going to the poorest and bringing the banquet there.

My retreats before being ordained to the diaconate and to the priesthood showed me that I ought to lead the life of Nazareth, which is my vocation, not in the Holy Land I love so well but among the people whose souls were most sick, the sheep who were most forsaken. I am the minister of a divine banquet which should be offered not to our brothers, relatives and rich neighbours, but to the crippled and the blind, to the most forsaken souls, where priests are most in shortage. When I was young, I had travelled through Algeria and Morocco. Morocco, as big as France and with a population of ten million people, did not have a single priest. In the Algerian Sahara, 7 or 8 times as big as France, and more densely populated than used to be thought there were a dozen missionaries. No people seemed to me more forsaken than these.

On July 10 1901 he will be ordained priest for the diocese of Viviers in the seminary chapel. His sister will be present at his first Mass at Our Lady of the Snows the next morning. Being unable to greet her at her arrival, he left her the following note.



« My dearest, thank you so much for coming. Your coming touches the depths of my heart. I will arrive during the night between Sunday and Monday, towards midnight or one o'clock in the morning; don't try waiting up for me. Instead go to bed early, like Trappists who go to bed at 8pm. When I arrive I will go straight to church to the foot of the Blessed Sacrament to whom I owe my first visit; afterwards I will remain in silence and adoration until the following morning after my first Mass. You won't be able to speak to me until then, but afterwards we will catch up my darling. Community Mass is sung around 6 am before the exposed Blessed Sacrament ; I will be the deacon...As soon as the High Mass is finished I will go to the sacristy, put on my chasuble and go back to the same altar to say my first Mass; I will give you holy communion through a grill of the little chapel where you will be...Following thanksgiving for my first Mass (three quarters or an hour later) I will come for a long visit with you... Wait for me in your room at that moment; take care to have a good breakfast after communion. Be sure that your coming here is a real joy for the whole community which, full of illusions as far as I am concerned, loves me a thousand times better than I deserve...

« Welcome my darling and thank you for coming. I embrace you as much as I love you, with all my heart in the heart of Jesus.

Brother Charles would have liked to be a priest in Morocco but that was out of the question, and so he thought of the Algerian Sahara. It was an area under military government and he needed the permission of the army if he was to be there. Relations between the Republic and the Church were terribly strained and his request was a difficult one. But he had many friends among the French officers. He wrote to one of them to ask for help:

My dear friend,

We are a handful of monks who cannot say the Our Father without thinking with pain of this vast Morocco where so many people live without « holding God's name holy, being part of his Kingdom, fulfilling his will and are ignorant of the bread of the Holy Eucharist. Knowing that we ought to love these poor people like ourselves, we would like with the help of God, in so far as it depends on our littleness, to do all that we can to bring to them the light of Christ and shed the rays of the Heart of Jesus on them...

So we wish to found on the Moroccan border not a big agricultural establishment but a kind of humble little hermitage where a few poor monks could live off of a bit of fruit and barley harvested by their own hands. ...It's evangelisation not by the word but by the presence of the Most Blessed Sacrament, the offering of the divine sacrifice, prayer, penance, the practice of evangelical virtues, charity, a fraternal and universal charity that means sharing the last mouthful of bread with anyone who is poor, with any guest, any stranger who comes. Receiving every person like a beloved brother.

He also needed permission from the White Fathers because the Sahara was an apostolic vicariate under their care. Fr. Huvelin writes a letter of recommendation for Charles to the Superior General of the White Fathers:

His vocation has always attracted him towards the Muslim world. His stay in Algeria, his exploration of Morocco, the years spent in Palestine have prepared him, toughened him for this mission. I have seen this vocation ripen. In my soul and conscience, I think that it is from God. Love of silence, humble action, that's what you will find in him. There's nothing strange or extraordinary about him, but there's something that pushes him from within. He is a strong instrument for a difficult job.

Within a few months he had all the permissions he needed. The military authorities will suggest that he settle in Beni Abbas, a big oasis in the Western Sahara, close to the Moroccan border. He arrives there Oct 29 1901.

Beni Abbas was had a very mixed population. There were two ksars (Arabic villages) among the palm trees. One had a population of 1000 inhabitants, all of whom spoke Berber. The other village counted 700 people who were Arabic speaking. Above the ridge that dominated the ksars and wadi was the garrison. Of the 800 men there, 200 were French and 600 were Arabs employed by the French army. The population also included 2 Spanish merchants and 6 Jewish merchants/craftsmen. There were also a great deal of slaves working in the oasis, drawing water for irrigating gardens and date trees. Most of them were of sub Saharan origin, having been stolen as children by Arab bandits.

Brother Charles built his fraternity half way between the village and the garrison. He wrote a description of his establishment to Henri de Castries who had helped him obtain his



permission from the military authorities:

Not far from the fort and the oasis, yet in a solitary place, I've found a little hollow which is arid but irrigable (water is abundant in Beni Abbas). With the help of God, I'm going to make it into a garden. On the flank of the hill, men from the garrison have started building me a dwelling. I am deeply grateful for their kindness and charity. They are using mud bricks and palm trunks and making a chapel, three cells and a guest room. I will move in tomorrow. That's how fast they've been working.

His inspiration in building his fraternity isn't European monasteries but zaouias, the seat of a Muslim confraternity which serves as a place of prayer, teaching and hospitality. During his trip to Morocco he had been their guest. His zaouia however will have the significant difference of the presence of the Eucharist. He is convinced that it will shine forth on all those who live around there.

As soon as he builds his fraternity his first care is to place on the walls of the sacristy and rooms posters that proclaim phrases from the Gospel that were his inspiration and joy. He needed even the walls to speak !

➤ Follow me !

- Live today as though you were going to die a martyr tonight.
- There are other sheep that are not of this fold and these I have to lead to.
- Father may they be one in us!

He rejoiced at having a place that finally belonged to him. He invites his cousin saying to him, “In Beni Abbes, I have my home, I am totally at home.” Permission comes from Mgr Guerin to found the Little Brothers of the Sacred heart. He takes the habit and calls himself the first little brother.

Even if in his rule he had crossed out the word *hermit* in order to replace it by *little brother*, the transition from the hermitage to the fraternity will be a slow process.

He had placed stones all around his establishment to mark his enclosure. He would not go outside of it but anyone could come in. And he will quickly be invaded.

Guests, poor people, slaves, visitors – they don't leave me a minute's peace. I'm the only one, with all the work of the monastery to do. I finished the little guest house on the 15th and since then every day we've had guests to lodge and to feed morning and evening. The place hasn't been empty once. There were as many as eleven one night, not counting an old cripple who lives there permanently. I have 60-100 visitors a day, quite often if not always.

He will be constantly torn between the demand of his very detailed rule and his many guests.

It's the same thing every day, poor people, sick people, one after the other. I reproach myself interiorly for not spending enough time in prayer and purely spiritual things. By day people never stop knocking at my door, and at night when it would be a good time for it I fall asleep like a wretch. It shames me and saddens me that sleep takes up more room than I want it to. I haven't time for it and it take its own.

Fr Huvelin is always pushing for him to bear with his humanity.

My dear friend, my dear child,

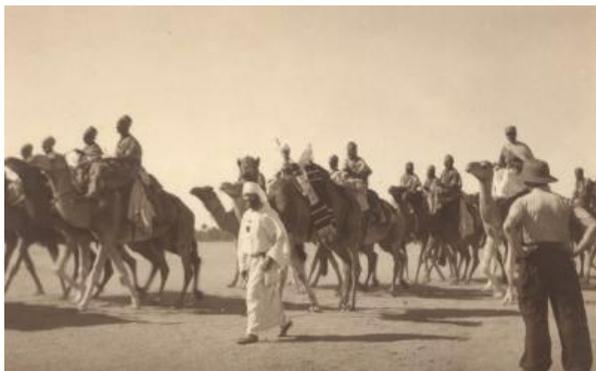
Put up with yourself! Be patient with yourself. Don't be so concerned about how much sleep you need, but over the fact that you restlessly always seek to give more, more, more and it doesn't leave you in peace. Hold yourself peacefully before God in order to receive his grace. And if you feel self hatred, then let it be a tranquil hatred, like deep water.

I rejoice that you can exert yourself a bit for the good of others. But that activity brings to the surface our shortcomings. Don't let it trouble you. One isn't worse because one has realized one's shortcomings.

Be peaceful in order to give yourself in peace.

The long contemplation of the Eucharist which marked the period of Nazareth is now going to blossom into a Eucharistic life. Communion with the body of Christ means that he's going to become a man that is eaten. It's the beginning of a new pathway of contemplation that finds Jesus not by escaping from the world but by going into it, among the poor.

Fraternity



He called his establishment the Fraternity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. One of the goals of his fraternity was to spread knowledge of the mystery of friendship for human kind hidden in God since all eternity and revealed in the Heart of Jesus. In calling himself a little brother he wanted to witness to a Fraternity that had the Sacred Heart as its starting point. If he dressed in the same way as the Sacred Heart he had painted in his chapel, it's because he wanted to be the living sign of a love that was bigger than just human love.

The way his chapel is organized is very important because it says a lot about his spirituality. He associates Fraternity with the Sacred Heart:

You have asked me for a description of the Chapel. The chapel dedicated to the Sacred heart of Jesus is called, "The Chapel of the Fraternity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus"...I want all people here, be they Christians, Muslims, Jewish or traditional religion to see me as their brother, a universal brother. They have started calling my house, "the fraternity" and that gives me pleasure.

Above the altar is a life size picture of the Sacred Heart with outstretched arms in order to embrace, welcome, summon all people and give himself for them by offering them his heart. This image covers the whole wall, from the ground up to the ceiling. It's exactly as wide as the altar. I'm the one who has painted it. When I don't have a picture that I like, I create one myself and count on people's tolerance!

Being a little brother didn't just mean being a presence of Jesus among the least, but also meant knowing how to recognize him in the least.

I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was a stranger, I was naked, sick, in prison, and you never helped, welcomed, visited me. Whatever you did not do to the least of these, you did not do it to me. (Mt 25: 42-45)

What a weighty saying. It is not there for us to make up commentaries about but to believe. We must see clearly that what we could have done for someone and did not do, it is Our Lord we have neglected to do it for. He did not say all the good we refused to do, no, all the good we did not do, all we could have done and neglected to do. The passerby who is poor, naked, a stranger, in trouble, asks nothing from us, but that person is a member of Jesus, a portion of Jesus. We let the person go by us and give him none of what he needs: it is Jesus we have let down.

How did he concretely live out this call to fraternity.

In a letter to his sister on Jan 17 1902 he speaks about his « children in Beni Abbes » :

1. slaves
2. travellers
3. those who are poor and sick
4. soldiers (600 Arabs, 200 French)

5. officers
6. native people in general 1000 Berbers, 700 Arabs
7. Muslim marabouts



8. Jews

He begins with the slave because they are the most suffering part of the population around him. France had signed for the abolishment of slavery at the Vienna Congress! But in this part of its colony the military authorities had deemed it prudent to turn a blind eye to the practice in order to not incur the wrath of the Arab owners of the palm groves who depended on slave labour. Br Charles had heard tell of slavery in Algeria but hadn't realized how bad it was. Once he was settled he wrote to Henri de Castries:

I had believed and had heard that slavery among the Muslims was a rather lenient affair. Now that I speak to many slave a day on familiar terms, and particularly when I speak to them out of hearing of their masters I can see how wrong I was. They are overworked (getting water for palm plantation), beaten daily, receive no food or clothes, and if they try to run away – which happens frequently – there is an armed pursuit.

At first he reacted by redeeming some slaves. He spent the money that Marie de Bondy had sent him to buy his land in order to redeem a young slave that he then named Joseph of the Sacred heart. Then there was Pierre and then 3 year old Abd Jesu whom he will baptise. It will be his first baptism. He will live with this toddler for a full year, writing to his cousin that he has to have him by his side constantly since there is no one that he can trust to look after him, not even for a minute. He will also take in Marie, an old blind woman who asks to be baptized. The officer in charge of Beni Abbes will be overwhelmed by the care Br Charles lavishes on her, like a son with his mother. He will cite it as proof of the heroic quality of his virtues at the Beatification Process. He will also buy back another young slave whom he will call Paul. The relationship with Paul will be a stormy one, but finally he's the only one who will stay with him for his whole life. Even in he was enrolled in the catechumenate, it never got as far as baptism. Br Charles was drawing inspiration from the foundations of the church in Rome where many of the early Christians were slaves.

He writes to his cousin whom he invites to be Abd Jesu's godmother: *Pray for my four children in Beni Abbes: Abd Jesu who has stayed with me and is becoming more and more of a dear. Paul, Pierre and Marie. These are the feeble beginnings of Christianity in these parts.*

But one month later he has to write to her:

Our little beginnings of Christianity here at Beni Abbes seem to be going back down to zero. May the will of Jesus be done. Paul has left me rather badly, and Pierre, whose parents live ten day's walk or so from here, wants to go back to them. Marie is going to have her cataracts operated on and if it works she won't have any more reason to stay and can go back to living on her own. There's only Abd Jesu left. He's becoming more of a dear every day and I'm anxious to see him in better hands than mine, with the Sisters of Saint Vincent de Paul.

He really wasn't cut out for active ministry.

At this time he will have a rather sharp exchange of letters with the White Father and Trappists back in France. He wrote to them about slavery in Beni Abbes, demanding that they speak up to decry the abomination of slavery he was witnessing each day. Putting chains on slaves meant putting chains on Jesus himself. It was also to make the local population hate the name of Christian.

While encouraging him to do what was possible, the White Father refused to become publicly involved in condemning what the Republic did in the colonies. Both they and the Trappists had already enough problems with the French government. Were they to denounce the government, they could very well be thrown out of Algeria. Besides, Mgr Guerin wasn't convinced that buying back slaves and then baptizing them was the best way to go about things. You only end up creating individuals who are cut off from their society. And having redeemed these young people, Br Charles then asked the White Fathers or Sisters to take them into their institutions. There were already enough financial strains on the mission without adding more. Br Charles will comply to the suggestions he receives, but not without regretting *that the representatives of Jesus content themselves with defending this cause in whispers and not from the rooftops for it is a cause of justice and charity.*

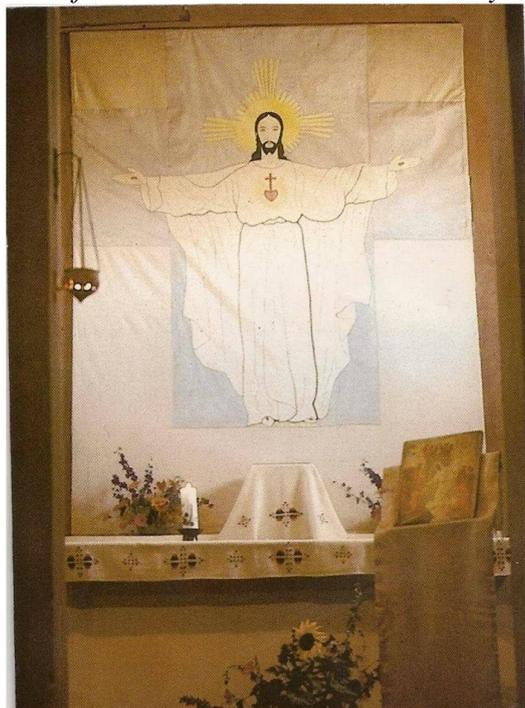
It wasn't just a case of improving their lot, because the very fact that they were slaves was wrong in and of itself.

Fraternity also reached out to others. After his visit to Beni Abbes in August 1903, Mgr Guerin wrote to his superiors:

During a long trip to this part of my diocese, I had the happy opportunity of spending a few days with my dear Saharan hermit. I was more edified than I can say by all the virtues I could admire in him: spirit of faith, zeal, charity, mortification, poverty, humility, gentleness and above all, a heavenly kind of joy that shone forth. I was equally happy to see the deep influence this true saint has exercised for the past two years and continues to exercise on all those who know him. All the Europeans, officers and soldiers who have passed through Beni Abbès, — whatever may be their personal opinions or their private conduct — are unanimous in declaring the religious and respectful veneration they have for this holy priest, who, in spite of themselves, has conquered their hearts by his goodness when they came to greet him while passing through Beni Abbes.

On the Muslims, the influence of Brother Charles of Jesus has been no less fruitful, yielding precious results. . The Christian marabout is well known a few hundred kilometres around. The locals know the « Christian marabout » of Beni Abbès, who personally lives so poorly and is nonetheless so charitable for others, especially the little and the weak whom he

hosts, nurses and feeds with a devotion that is truly other worldly.



Another White Father recalled what he heard some men from the Sahara say about the Christian marabout they had met. *That's a real Marabout! He doesn't eat, doesn't drink, doesn't sleep, prays all the time. He does good to Islam (meaning he treats Muslims with kindness)*

If Brother Charles was to be a universal brother in Beni Abbes, it meant that he had to be a brother not just to the little but also to the great. Colonel Lyautey remember his visit to his hermitage.

The next morning at 7am, the officers and myself attended Mass celebrated in his hermitage. His chapel was a tumble down buildings, a miserable hallway with pillars and reeds for a roof. His altar was a board. The decoration was a cotton panel painted with an image of Christ. His candlesticks were tins. Our feet were sunk in the sand. Well! I have never seen Mass celebrated the way Fr. de Foucauld did. I thought I was in 7th heaven. It's one of the greatest impressions of my life.

Being a brother also extended to those who were far away. He was an incredible correspondent, writing 1000's of letters: to his family, the Trappists, the White Fathers and Sisters, the Poor Clare in Nazareth and Jerusalem, Fr Huvelin, many soldiers and their families.

He was very faithful about writing to each one when it was their feast, or some anniversary. The way he wrote corresponded to each one. In the Sahara he didn't always have enough paper and so sometimes he would write on the back of envelopes. His style always adapted itself to the person to whom he was writing. But all his letter ended with a greeting that came from the Sacred Heart.

He had built his little monastery in the hope that others would follow.

I have finished paying for my land: It is nine acres with plenty of water, 180 palm trees, quite a bit of fruit trees; There is enough to occupy 20-30 monks with the produce of fruit trees and the garden. It's enough for them to make a living and we can also increase the number of palm trees that are very profitable.

The absence of disciples will torment him. He will write to the Trappists and White Fathers who had many candidates, asking them if they didn't see someone they could send him. He even asked dom Martin to send Br Augustine, the bursar at Our Lady of the Snows who had shown an interest in following him. But he received the following reply:

We cannot send you Br. Augustin. We cannot in good faith, remove him from a religious order which has the Church's approval in order to thrust him into a pious undertaking, which is certainly admirable, but unlikely to be successful according to the opinion of a few prudent peoples. »

Fr Huvelin hadn't been wrong. Br Charles could be admired but not imitated.

Historical Context

At the end of this section where we have talked about Fraternity it might be good to pause and consider the question of Br Charles' attitude in a context of colonization.

With industrialization, the western European powers engaged in a massive colonial expansion, especially in Africa. This led, inevitably to hostility between the new "rulers", the colonizing military, and the "ruled", the local peoples. It was in this situation that Charles wished to be "the universal brother", a brother to each and every person he encountered. Such a simple and bold claim strikes at the heart of inhuman structures and relationships, and begins to remake a world of respect and equality. Charles did this, not by words –he, as we do, mistrusted mere words – but by simple, everyday actions and gestures, with a readiness, when need be, to denounce abuses and take risks.

France had begun with the occupation of Algiers in 1830. But the occupation quickly extended to the rest of the coastal plain. Wheat, fruit trees and vines did well. It soon became a land of immigration. There will be around one million French by 1954. It goes from being a land governed by the military to being a land governed by civil government. People spoke of French Algeria.

The Church in North Africa was almost exclusively European. The important figure at that time is Cardinal Lavigerie, founder of the White Fathers. He saw colonisation as a providential opportunity to revive Christianity in northern Africa.

Br Charles would have subscribed to that whole heartedly. But he was also aware that the task of fraternisation in which he wanted to participated, might not be understood that way by people from the colonies. He wrote to Father Huvelin about this in 1908.

I would like to ask your advice about one thing. Our Algeria, we're not doing anything to help the natives. Civil authorities just try to increase peoples' needs and enrich themselves at their cost. They're only after their own personal interest. The military authorities only do a minimum in administering them, without seriously trying to instil any progress. Certain develop a liking for the Arab way of life and become half Arab themselves. The clergy doesn't have any interest in the natives. It's as if they didn't exist, except for the White Fathers. And the latter, even though they were founded for Arabs in northern Algeria, find the work unrewarding and are now putting most of their energy into work in Sub Saharan Africa. So their effort is going there and they've only got a small number of missionaries in Algeria, whose influence is almost nil. So that we have had here more than 3 million Muslims for over 70 years and we have done almost nothing for their moral progress. A million Europeans live here in Algeria, but are totally separate. They don't penetrate into their setting and are totally ignorant about everything that concerns them. No intimate contact, looking at them like strangers and most of the time like enemies. The duties of a people who have colonies aren't those. And that spirit of fraternity that no one denies points to duties that are quite different: to see in these people backward brothers whom we must educate, and whose spirit and character we must elevate as high as possible so as to fulfill towards them our duties as good brothers.

Even if Br Charles was aware of the evils that colonialism was bringing about, and spoke against it, he never asked the basic question about France's right to occupy another land. Can we take him to task for thinking like everyone else did in those days?

