

The Mystery of the Hidden Life of Jesus in Nazareth

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On Dec 1st, 1916, in the evening hours, Charles de Foucauld fell victim to a bullet fired by a frightened boy who was guarding him. He fell down dead in front of the mud-fort in Tamanrasset which he had built with the villagers for their protection. He was far away from his native land, the only Christian living alone in the village among his friends of the Tuareg tribe.

He was buried in Tamanrasset where he had lived among the Tuareg population for the last 14 years. Later his tomb was moved to El Golea in 1929, closer to human habitation in anticipation of his beatification. But he was beatified only in 2007 by Pope Benedict XVI, thus officially recognizing the authenticity of his saintly life.

On the centenary year of his death, it is good to ask ourselves the question, "What is the meaning of his life and his message?"

The meaning and message of Charles de Foucauld may perhaps be best expressed by no less a person than Pope Francis himself. In his homily during the evening vigil before the Synod of the Family on October 3, 2015, Pope Francis said:

Charles de Foucauld, perhaps like few others, sensed the implications of the spirituality which emanated from Nazareth.

This great explorer, hastily abandoned his military career, fascinated by the mystery of the Holy Family, by the daily relationships of Jesus with his parents and neighbors, working silently and praying humbly.... To understand the family of today, let us also enter like Br. Charles, into the mystery of the Family of Nazareth, in its hidden, ordinary and common life like most of our families do.

The Pope sums up the life and message of Blessed Charles de Foucauld in the words, "the spirituality which emanated from Nazareth". Yes, 'Spirituality of Nazareth' is the heritage of Br. Charles. What does 'spirituality of Nazareth' mean for us today?

A few words about his extra-ordinary life

Br. Charles lost his parents already when he was a child. He was brought up by grandparents. There were periods of 'restlessness' during his youth. However, being the heir viscount of an aristocratic family, which had distinguished itself in military skills, he became an army officer of the colonial regiment of France in Algeria. He was suspended from military service due to misbehavior. Later, when he resumed his duties as commander for a dangerous expedition, he showed his true colors. After resigning from the army, he opted for a risky exploration of Morocco, which he had to crisscross in disguise, while making a detailed survey of the country. He explored the unknown territories of the desert of Sahara for a year. He was acclaimed for his discoveries with awards.

During his travel in the Saharan region, Charles was confronted by the faith of the Muslims of the desert; the ardent way the believers publicly prostrated before the Unseen. On his return to France, he was also touched by the loving affection of his cousin, who was very devoutly

practicing her native faith. At the bottom of despair, completely at a loss with himself, He entered a Church at Paris. There he made a confession and had a conversion experience at the age of 28. He was motivated to go on a pilgrimage to the holy land, to discover and follow Jesus in the land of Nazareth that Jesus lived in 2000 years ago. He was so moved by the experience of the simple, poor and austere life of the village he witnessed there that he decided to live a life of poverty and abjection. So, he became a Trappist monk. After seven years of monastic life, he realized that even that sort of prayerful secluded life did not satisfy him. Many families living outside the monastery were living still more destitute life. He sought permission to be one with them. Providentially he got a job to do garden work in the convent of Poor Clares. There he lived in a small hut outside the convent. Then he was so taken up with the devotion to the hidden presence of the Lord Jesus in the Holy Eucharist that he spent hours and hours before the Blessed Sacrament. Seeing his attachment to the hidden mystery of the Eucharist, he was advised to become a priest and thereby bring the feast of the Eucharist to people. So, at the age 43 he was ordained a priest. But he did not want to serve his kith and kin. He chose to live far away in the Sahara Desert.

Father Charles established his hermitage at Beni-Abbes, close to the border with Morocco in the hope of crossing one day into the forbidden territory. He was so one with the plight of his neighbors and opened his poor dwelling to all and extended his unceasing hospitality to all the needy. His routine was to spend long hours in prayer, and especially before the Blessed Sacrament, the hidden presence of the Lord, and make himself available to all as a universal brother. "I would like all the people here, the Christians, the Muslims and the Jews, to look on me as their brother, the universal brother. They are beginning to call my house 'the fraternity' and this makes me very happy". Thus, a Reverend Father now became a Brother to everybody irrespective of creed, color and class.

Brother Charles also desired to set up two fraternal communities: one of men religious and other of women religious, who would be motivated to live the '**hidden life of Nazareth**' of Jesus. He formulated rules for those communities based on simplicity, abjection, prayer and manual work. He also envisioned a Union of Brothers and Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, composed of Christians without distinction, whether priests, religious or laity, who would live "openly, not secretly, but silently doing good" and witnessing by their life the hidden life of Jesus at Nazareth. He saw this as the Nazareth ideal of "**preaching the Gospel not by words but by living it**" and thereby becoming 'a seductive perfume that spreads'. But at his death, except for a small group which was started in France as a Sodality, none of his dreams were realized. But after his death, the seeds sprouted, and his dreams took shape in the lives of those who adopted them.

The Dream of a Nazareth Way of Life

It is in 1893 that he starts speaking about it in his letters, while he is still a Trappist monk. He is disillusioned by changes in the Trappist Order; “The Order is moving away from poverty, abjection, manual work and austerity.”¹ He then articulated his vision of religious life in line with the hidden life of Jesus: “I saw this in the streets of Nazareth seven years ago, walked by Our Lord, poor artisan lost in abjection and obscurity. I have the desire to lead this life”.² Within a few months, he was so captured by his vision that he was determined to get into that life of abjection and obscurity: “I want to throw myself into the last place following Our Lord.”³ He finally obtained permission to go to Nazareth and there live this dream of living a life of poverty like the Lord, Jesus.

His dream was not only to live that life himself, but also by communities of brothers and sisters who would follow the Nazarean life of Jesus.

The task to which I should consecrate my life is the formation of two little families bearing the name of one, the Little Brothers of the Sacred heart of Jesus, and the other, Little Sisters of the Sacred heart of Jesus, both having the same goal; the glorification of God by the imitation of the hidden life of Jesus. Little cloistered fraternities, about 20 brothers or sisters, marked by love, adoration, immolation, supplication, manual work, poverty, abjection, recollection, silence by perpetual adoration of the sacred Host and the conversion of the pagans... **We should imitate as faithfully as possible the hidden life of Jesus at Nazareth.**⁴

Brother Charles strived constantly to live up to this ideal in his daily life and hoped that others would join him in the desert to share the Nazarean way of life. Towards the end of his life, he became aware that none of his dreams would be realized in his life time and that no one may follow him, he then resolved that he would live up to death his dream of Nazareth. He reformulated his ideal in the following words:

Whether you are alone or in a company of a few brothers, take the life of Nazareth as your aim for all purposes, in all its simplicity and breadth, using the rule as a general directive to enter into the life of Nazareth”.

Like Jesus of Nazareth, no particular dress, no enclosure, no dwelling far from all inhabitation, should be near to a village like Jesus at Nazareth, Not less than 8 hours of work a day manual work or otherwise-like Jesus at Nazareth, no big estates or large houses, like Jesus at Nazareth, No big expenses, nor even big alms, Pray like Jesus, as much as Jesus (like him give an important place to prayer), Like him, give an important place to manual work, In a word in everything follow Jesus at Nazareth. ... **The life of**

¹ In a letter to his spiritual father, Huvelin, dated August 26th, 1893

² In a letter dated 31st May 1896

³ In a letter dated 19th August 1896

⁴ Letter to Suzanne Perrette, Lyon, dated 15th Dec. 1901

Nazareth can be led anywhere, lead it where it will be of most service to your neighbor.⁵

During the last years of his life at Tamanrasset, he followed these directives in his daily living. He did not renounce to the dream of seeing others who would live this ideal, not as religious but as committed Christians wherever they are. With this intention, from 1909, he promoted the idea of an association of lay people, who would collaborate with priests “like Priscilla and Aquila”. He called this **the Union of the *Brothers and Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus for priests and lay people.***

The image of the association is the holy family of Nazareth, to live openly, not secretly, but silently without making noise, doing good in silence around oneself and for those far away, like Jesus who worked in Nazareth without noise for the salvation of the world⁶

The Virtues of Nazareth

So, we could say that up to the end of his life, Br. Charles meditated and deepened his understanding of the mystery of Nazareth and strived to live it in his personal life. It would be therefore, interesting for us to trace this inner journey of Charles and identify some of his core intuitions concerning the spirituality of Nazareth.

The most central intuition that he had was that Jesus, the Son of God, incarnation of God’s love became a member of a small family, with Joseph his foster father and Mary, his mother. This became his dream of founding communities which would adapt as their foundational principles *the virtues of the family of Nazareth.*

The Holy Family of Nazareth

There is a meditation written by Charles in 1897 in which he speaks about it: “the example of true devotion given me in my family” in his childhood and in his youth which profoundly influenced him in his return to a life of faith and virtue.

So, when he speaks of his dream of Nazarean communities to Fr. Huvelin,⁷ he uses expressions such as the following:

- These little nests of fervent and working life, to reproduce that of Our Lord under the protection of Mary and Joseph,
- which means, some souls coming together to live Nazareth life, working with their hands, like the Holy Family, practicing the virtues of Nazareth, small family, very small, simple, and

⁵ *Directives of 1905*, written on his way to Tuareg territory on 22 July 1905

⁶ Letter from Tamanrasset sent to Joseph Hours on 13th Feb 1913

⁷ Letter to Fr. Huvelin, 22nd oct.1898

- A few people gathered together to lead the life of Nazareth to live by their work the way the holy family did and practice the Nazareth virtues as they contemplate Jesus.

So, he speaks of ‘practicing the virtues of Nazareth’.

What are these virtues?

Preaching the Gospel, not by words but by the Life

First, it is the **example of a good Christian living**. It comes directly from his experience of the sisterly concern showered on him by his cousin sister even when he was living a dissolute life. She never reproached him but drew him gently back into the path of virtue by her charitable attitude, which he later identified as “preaching the Gospel, not by words but by living it” by the example of a holy life, which acts as “the seductive perfume that spreads”. He compares this to the silent evangelizing action of Mary, Mother of Jesus in her life at Nazareth beside her Son.

This is one of the pillars of his understanding of the spirituality of Nazareth.” Work with me as my mother did, **without words, in silence**, during the people who do not know me. Carry me among them by setting up a tabernacle. Take the gospel there not by preaching it with your lips, but preaching it with your example, not by proclaiming it but by living it”⁸ This is what Jesus too lived in Nazareth. He “proclaimed the Gospel, not by words, but by his life”. In fact, He was the living Gospel!

Living in the Continual Presence of God

Another essential component of the spirituality of Nazareth as Br. Charles understood it, is, **living in the continual presence of God**. This is a conviction which he received from his contact with Islam. He speaks about it to his friend, Henry de Castries, a specialist in Moroccan Islamic traditions: “Islam made a very deep impression on me. The sight of such faith, of people living in the continual presence of God, made me glimpse something greater and truer than worldly pursuits”⁹ and again, “Allah Akbar! God is great, greater than everything that we can think of! He alone should inhabit our thoughts and words. God is so great. There is such a difference between God and all that is not Him”¹⁰

Br. Charles will make his own this conviction which he received from Islam and he will integrate it into his understanding of Nazareth. Jesus lived in constant intimacy with his Father even as he

⁸ Meditation on the Visitation, Nazareth. March 1898

⁹ letter to H.de Castries, 8th July 1901

¹⁰ Letter to H. de Castries 14th August 1901

lived the ordinary life of a carpenter in “one continual outpouring into God, a continual gazing at God, unending contemplation of God at every moment of your life.”¹¹

The Infinite Humility of Nazareth

Br. Charles understood the incarnation of the Son of God in Nazareth as the infinite humility of God becoming human. He uses the words like ‘*the last place*’, ‘*abjection*’ to express his understanding of this mystery. This is an intuition that Br. Charles treasured after listening to a sermon from Fr. Huvelin. He writes in a meditation, addressing himself to Jesus, “You gave me too, those words in a sermon of Fr. Huvelin which are now so indelibly engraved on my soul; “You so truly have taken the last place that no one will ever be able to take it from you”¹². But this search for ‘the last place’ or ‘abjection’ as he calls it has its source in the infinite goodness of God, it is not just a pious expression but a deep conviction which he translated into imitation. “The incarnation takes its source from God’s goodness..... the infinite humility such a mystery contains. God the infinite, the almighty becomes human, the least of all human beings’¹³ and again, ‘He went down with them and came to Nazareth..... All his life he did nothing but go down’¹⁴. This is the underlying logic of ‘the humble, obscure existence of the divine Workman of Nazareth’¹⁵ Therefore his passion for imitation of the same path of Nazareth: “I am thirsting to lead at last the life I’ve been looking for.....I glimpsed it, guessed at it as I was walking the streets of Nazareth where the feet of our Lord had trod, a poor craftsman lost in extreme lowliness and obscurity”¹⁶ Hence his intense desire of plunging himself into humility, to the last place, into abjection is due to a burning desire to share in the infinite goodness of God.

A new understanding of Nazareth

Br. Charles had left the monastery and settled down in Nazareth as a servant of the Poor Clares so that he could imitate the Nazarean existence of Jesus physically, ‘*to put his feet in the footsteps of Jesus*’ as he says in his meditations. “I go down to the grotto that was part of the holy family’s house. I stay there saying the rosary and hearing masses. It delights me deeply to look at the rock walls that Jesus once had before his eyes and touched with his hands”¹⁷ But this was only a stage of preparation for a deeper understanding of what Nazareth really was in the plan of God. He received it as a grace during his preparation for ordination in 1901. He presents this new understanding in a letter, “My final retreats before ordination to the diaconate and priesthood having shown me that the life of Nazareth which was my vocation ought to be led not in the holy land that I love so much, but among the most distressed souls, the sheep most

¹¹ Meditation about the Hidden Life, Nazareth 1898.

¹² Retreat at Nazareth. Nov 1897

¹³ Nazareth. Nov 1987

¹⁴ June 1916 Tamanrasset

¹⁵ January 1889.

¹⁶ To Marie de Bondy, 24th June 1896

¹⁷ Letter to R.de Blic 25th nov.1897

completely lost”.¹⁸ This also meant a new understanding of how he should live the grace of ministerial priesthood; “The divine feast of which I am the minister must be offered not to the brethren and their relations and the rich neighbors, but to the lamest and blindest of men, the most abandoned souls, those without priests”.¹⁹ So, Nazareth is not to be identified as a geographically static reality linked to the holy land of Palestine, but that place where “people are most in need, among the most distressed souls, the most completely lost, the most abandoned, among the lamest and blindest of men”.

This is a new understanding of Nazareth which frees Br. Charles from a rigid interpretation of the Gospel, but pushes him to fulfill his destiny by leaving Nazareth and settling in the Sahara, finally settling down among the most remote populations of the desert in Tamanrasset.

The sacrament of the least

Another fundamental intuition which is an integral piece of the understanding of Nazarean vocation of Br. Charles is the direct link that he made between the “sacrament of the Eucharist and the sacrament of fraternity with the least”. He confided this understanding in a letter to his great friend Louis Massignon (whom he considered as his spiritual heir) in these words, *“I think there is no saying of the gospel that made a deeper impression on me and more transformed my life than this one; ‘whatsoever you did to one of the least of these, you did it to me’. If we remember that these are the words of uncreated truth and come from the same lips that said, ‘this is my body, this is my blood’ how compellingly we are moved to seek out Jesus and love him in the ‘least ones’ the sinners, the poor”*²⁰

This intuition resolved a conflict that he had lived in the Sahara: how to reconcile this compelling need to be, at the same time, a watchman keeping vigil in front of his Beloved Lord and Master present in the Eucharist and this equally compelling commitment to welcome people who claimed his attention, specially the poor who came to him seeking hospitality, food, shelter and solace? He felt torn and tired himself in effort to do justice to these apparently contradictory demands of Nazarean life. But by a perseverant effort to practice the Gospel, he found unity and shared that discovery with Massignon.

Universal Brotherhood

In Beni Abbes, where he first settled, close to the Moroccan border, he called himself ‘Little Brother Charles of Jesus’. People named him the ‘Marabout’, the term used by the people of the desert to identify a holy man. His house was called the ‘khaoua’, the fraternity. This last word corresponded to the deepest vow of Br. Charles.

¹⁸ Letter to Fr. Caron April 8, 1905.

¹⁹ Letter to Fr. Caron, cited above

²⁰ letter to Louis Massignon, 1st Aug. 1916, four months before his death

“I want all the people here, be they, Christians, Muslims, Jews or whatever, to see me as their brother, a universal brother. They have started calling my house ‘the fraternity’ and that gives me pleasure”²¹

He will paint the image of the Sacred Heart in his chapel with the arms outstretched to signify what he meant and what he wanted to be: universal brother, like Jesus, the Savior of all humanity. He extended hospitality to everyone who called on him, irrespective of who they were, nomads of the desert, travelers passing by, French soldiers, officials of the French administration and anyone else who came to his door. He imagined that it was what Jesus lived also in Nazareth, a brother to one and all.

Evangelization by Presence

He discovered also a new way of living and sharing the Gospel, a new way of evangelization, as we call it now-a-days: a mere fraternal presence of prayer, friendship and humble fidelity to living the Gospel without aiming at conversion or active preaching. This is how he puts it, “This would-be evangelization not by the word, but by the presence of the Bl. Sacrament, the offering of the holy sacrifice, prayer, penitence, the practice of evangelical virtues and charity, a brotherly charity offered to all”.²² He had an intuition that this way of being there, as a witness of the Gospel, humble and accessible was the way Jesus preached the Gospel in Nazareth. He wrote to his Bishop to share this conviction, “You achieve something even if you don’t do much, because you start to belong to the country. You are approachable and unimposing there: it gives you such “littleness”. (Letter to Bishop Guerin, 2nd July 1907). This is how he saw his role in settling down in the God forsaken remote village of Tamanrasset, “I’m choosing this forsaken spot and I am settling here, imploring Jesus to bless this endeavor where I want my life to have as its sole model his life at Nazareth”. (Notes from Tamanrasset. 11 Aug 1905).

In fact, he went further. He had said in 1908 to a Protestant doctor by the name of Dautheville, “I am not here to convert the Tuareg people but to try to understand them.... You are Protestant, Tessiere (another friend) has no faith at all, the Tuareg are Muslim. I am convinced that God will welcome all of us if we deserve it”

He died with this conviction when on that fateful evening, he was shot down as the sun was going down in the horizon of Tamanrasset.

The letter written by Moussa Ag Amastane, the Chief of the Tuaregs to his sister, Marie de Blic, one month after the death, says it all in a moving testimony:

**“Charles the Marabout has not died only for you. He has died for us all.
May God grant him mercy and may we all be together with him in paradise”²³**

²¹ Letter to M. de Bondy, 7 Jan 1902

²² Letter to Henry de Castries 23 June 1901

²³ From Moussa Ag Amastan the Amoenakal of Hoggar to Marie de Blic

Conclusion

I have deliberately confined myself to sketching the contours of one overarching conviction of Blessed Br. Charles de Foucauld; his commitment to the **mystery of the hidden life of Jesus in Nazareth.**

In Nazareth for 30 years Jesus spoke the same way as everybody, with quite **'ordinary' words.**

It is with the help of the **day-to-day words** that Jesus expressed his intimacy with his Father.

When meditating on this Nazareth life, are we not asked to re-discover these **'ordinary' words of today** for expressing God's revelation through Jesus?

This is the challenge of the Gospel of Nazareth for which Br. Charles gave his life. It is his message to the Church of Today

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