

Last Sunday, the French hermit Charles de Foucauld was canonised in Rome by Pope Francis. He is our ‘Saint of the Week (see Newsletter) - and the article below from last week’s Tablet magazine illustrates how many people he has inspired.

Although he died in obscurity, his message that the Gospel is best ‘shown’ rather than ‘told’ has since inspired a growing number of followers / By KATHLEEN McKEE

In the footsteps of a saint

I WAS BORN in France but grew up in the city of London, Ontario. My father was a New Zealander and my mother French. My parents were deeply educated in their faith and religious books and conversations abounded at home. At 16, I was sent to Mexico on a student exchange. It ended rather badly, with me being shipped home nine months later. My parents were at the airport waiting for me. There were no questions, just a sense of gratitude that I was back safe and sound. I didn’t realise it at the time but the experience of the prodigal daughter would be the background on to which a call would be grafted.

During the following weeks, I picked up a copy of *Letters from the Desert* by Carlo Carretto. Until I began to read it I had vaguely thought of entering a cloistered order. But Carretto spoke of contemplation in the marketplace. It was a shock and a call. Hadn’t Jesus, Mary and Joseph lived in the small town of Nazareth? Could you make a better choice than theirs? The incarnation had made the bustle of everyday life a meeting place with the Father.

I was particularly intrigued and disconcerted by the central character. His name was Charles de Foucauld. This former French cavalry officer seemed oddly out of sync with the rest of an otherwise riveting book. Carretto wrote that Foucauld “was convinced that the most effective method of preaching the Gospel was to live it. Especially today, people no longer want to listen to sermons. They want to see the Gospel in action.”

I decided to seek out the communities inspired by the life of Foucauld. Eventually, in 1981, I joined the Little Sisters of Jesus in Montreal. They lived in a small house in a working-class neighbourhood. One of the sisters worked in the garment industry and another did cleaning jobs. The other two remained at home, so they could be available for neighbours and others who would often drop by. I was enchanted. Noise from the street would pour into the chapel through the window. Far from distracting me, it became part of my prayer, shaping it according to the conditions the Son of God himself had chosen.

During my years of formation, I learnt about our founder, Madeleine Hutin, who had taken the name Little Sister Magdeleine. She was easy to like, but the man whose life had inspired her, Charles de Foucauld, was a harder nut to crack. I only had my first profound encounter with him just before I took my final vows. By then I knew my community and myself much better. But it was a time of

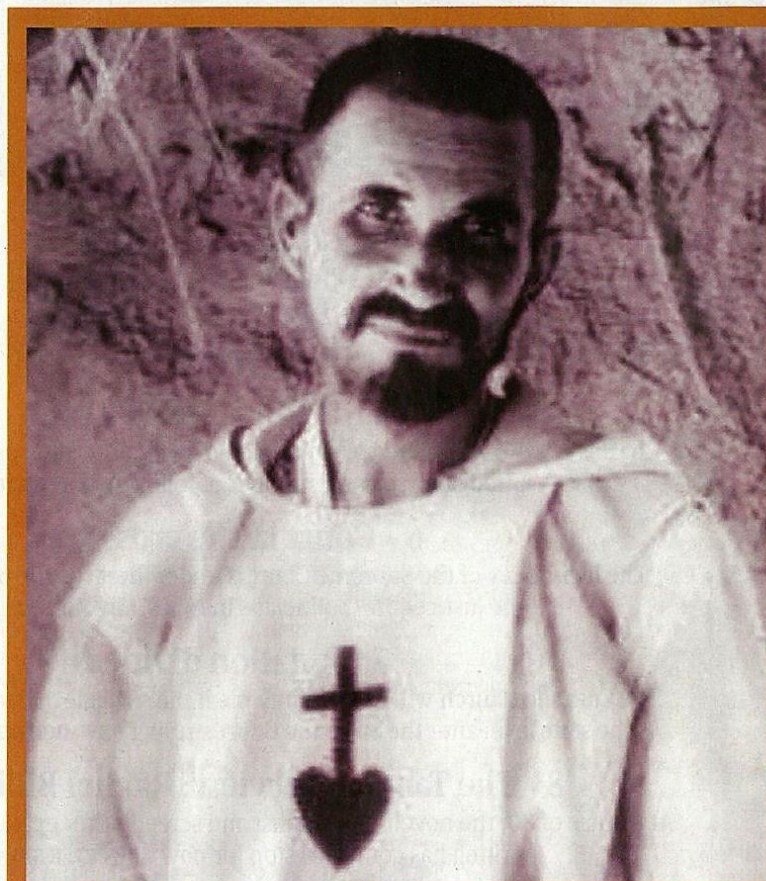


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Charles de Foucauld:
‘The good you do depends not on what you say or do but on what you are’

crisis. Should I or shouldn’t I go ahead with making this commitment? Chastity had a painful bite to it. I was in Paris, staying with my grandmother for a few days before rejoining the group preparing for this decisive step, when I got up early one morning and walked to the magnificent Church of Saint-Augustin in the 8th arrondissement. This was where Foucauld had had his life-changing encounter with Abbé Henri Huvelin. The same confessional was still there. I sat on the step for a long time, unburdening my heart. And that day a relationship began.

I BEGAN TO UNPACK the man and his message. Born into an aristocratic family in Strasbourg in 1858, Foucauld had turned away from the Church as a teenager and joined the French army. After his conversion, he had joined a Trappist monastery in Ardèche, France, and later transferred to one in Akbes, Syria. Leaving the monastery in 1897, he worked as gardener and sacristan for the Poor Clare nuns in Nazareth and later in Jerusalem. He would spend the last 15 years of his life

among the Muslim Tuareg in the Algerian Sahara. In 1905, he came to Tamanrasset, where he lived a peaceful, hidden life. He attracted no companions. There were no conversions. He wrote rules for congregations that never came to birth and he died alone in the Sahara, killed by Tuareg rebels on 1 December 1916.

René Voillaume, the French priest who founded the Little Brothers of Jesus in 1933, took my understanding of Foucauld to a deeper level. He acknowledged that Foucauld’s gospel meditations could be dull and repetitive, but suggested we pay attention less to their content than to the consistency and zeal with which he undertook them. “He constantly strove to know Jesus better because you cannot love what you do not know.” That phrase cast all those meditations in a completely different light.

After I took my final vows, I was sent to Poland. I was asked to lead sessions about Charles de Foucauld, and after a few years I knew the details of his life story inside out. But the next question was: “What did that

life mean for me?" I found the answer partly in conversations with other people ... my own sisters, the little brothers, priests and laypeople. But it also lay in unpacking my own experience as a Little Sister. Charles' intuitions were realised in the very house in which I lived. It's there I was being taught to be "little", to be a "sister" and, the hardest part, to be "of Jesus".

Today I live in Walsingham, "England's Nazareth", where the community has had a presence for over 50 years. I arrived after more than 10 years as a member of the community's formation team in Rome. It was an abrupt change to find myself back in a small town. I had begun my novitiate in Walsingham 35 years earlier, so it was very much a question of going back to the beginning "and knowing the place for the first time". And now, rather than talking about Foucauld as I had done in Rome, I found myself living the message again. He often referred to the Visitation of Mary to her cousin Elizabeth as a kind of icon of his vocation. This was first of all a question of "setting out" as Mary had. Pope Francis often speaks of leaving our comfort zone in order to set out for the "peripheries". At age 59 I was lucky enough to get a job as a housekeeper in a seaside hotel five miles away from the community's home. It is a "setting out" in every sense of the word: I travel there by bicycle in all kinds of weather, but it is also a departure in the sense that I

meet people who are very different from me, their lives often marked by rural poverty.

THERE ARE many ways of "being with" people, but taking a job puts you side by side with a random selection of people from very different backgrounds. All those I work with in the hotel know that I'm a nun, but what do they make of me? Foucauld liked to say: "The good you do depends not on what you say or do but on what you are." I'm not sure that I come across as a shining example of an evangelical life. But my prayer is that through my presence people might discover God's love and care for them. None of the people I work with is a churchgoer, and none has become a churchgoer since I started there. In this, I'm no more successful than Foucauld. But I have noticed that many people have an innate sense of God, though it is often overshadowed by a sense that they are living in a way that falls short of the life God wishes for them. I believe that through sharing their lives and using the language of their daily existence, I can live another image of God. In the story of the Visitation, Mary says nothing. She simply brings Jesus into Elizabeth's house, and what she carries speaks to what the other carries deep within. Etched on Foucauld's grave are the words: "I want to cry the Gospel with my life". I believe that something like that happens. Perhaps those who are more aware of their sinfulness have a better chance at discovering a love of

the kind God is. Certainly, that was Charles de Foucauld's own experience.

If Foucauld had set out for the Sahara to bring the Gospel to the people there, his first task was to learn their language. He had arrived in Tamanrasset with a translation of the Gospel but soon discovered how worthless it was. A friend who was a specialist in Berber dialects taught him to begin by listening. A language is bigger than words. They spent hours around the campfire listening to people sing, recite poetry and narrate their valiant deeds. Isn't that what Jesus did for 30 years in Nazareth, where the Word of God kept silence and listened? The people of Nazareth gave Jesus a language in which to speak about God: stories about sons that ran away to the big cities, and women who swept their homes to find lost coins. Later, people would be amazed and enthralled to hear Jesus speak of the Kingdom of God in terms of their own lives.

Perhaps the special gift of being a contemplative living among the poor, in the hubbub of the everyday, is to discover just how much God loved the world. And to feel a love of the kind that God is, well up inside, and to touch the people around us.

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Charles de Foucauld's 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.