

A Year of the Priest story
Blessed Charles de Foucauld-- Priest--1858 to 1916

PART ONE OF SIX:

His conversion happened upon visiting with a priest. He was a young man, then, as he 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 attention on him, and said:..."Kneel down and confess to God, you will believe!" Charles didn't understand, as he was coming to ask questions, not to confess sins. Yet, the priest explained that sins often clouds our vision and weakens our will for good. "Confess! The Lord has light to shed on you." Charles knelt down and confessed his entire life. When he had received absolution for his sins, the priest went on, "Are you fasting?"—"Yes, said Charles.." Then, go to Communion!" Charles went to Mass, and received Our Lord. It was only his second time to receive the Eucharist. Charles Foucauld was 28 years old. It was 1886.

Charles was born into a very Christian family, but he had lost both his mother and his father at an early age. In the care, thereafter, of a grandfather, he became a spoiled and demanding child. Upon growing up, he also began to read harmful things to his mind and heart, and soon after his school years were completed, he lost all faith.

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..." 'I did not have Christian teachers who were really convicted about their faith, so I was rarely challenged out of my tepidity and my disassociation with God. Oh, the importance of good teachers and models for our youth today! But there I went into adulthood: all egoism, all vanity, all impiety, all desire for evil... and of laziness. In 1878, he went on to a military 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. In 1880, Second Lieutenant de Foucauld left with his regiment for Algeria. A young woman joined him there, falsely 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. A change was happening in his life. He started to discern what he life really stood for.

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

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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 relatives 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. With all of the religious aspects of Muslim life that we witnessed, it led him to say to himself, "And me with no religion!"

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PART TWO OF SIX:

In the last bulletin, we began the life story of Fr. Charles de Foucauld, a priest and saint of the Church. We heard of his upbringing, his loss of faith, and his time in the French military. We stopped Part One with his return to France and the popularity of a book he wrote on life in Morocco, then much of an unknown place to Europeans

Charles de Foucauld would eventually become a recognized "saint-blessed" of the Church, but the lessons and conversions of the young man Charles were all part of the later call. He had seen Morocco in the guise of a traveler. He had seen the public practice and prayer of Islam in the country, which got his attention. He even imagined becoming Muslim but, even at first glance, it seemed to him that the religion of Mohammed could not be true, He saw through some things about Islam, which the start of it was that it seemed to him to be too materialistic or of this world. It did not offer him release from his own attractions to the self-comforted life. Yet, in spite of the pleasant and popular life Charles was leading, his inner sadness only grew. In his free time, he looked at the books of pagan philosophers. Their answers seemed weak...

And so it was that, providentially, Charles met a priest, Father Huvelin, one evening in 1886 at his Aunt Moytessier's home. This man of God's affection for sinners moved him, as he spoke of how his ministry was to set people free, such like Charles. The priest talked of the severity of the lost soul's position, whose final judgment awaited them with gloomy and dark consequences. He talked of the soul's need to become free to live in The Light of Christ. This particular conversation convinced Charles to later visit the priest, hence the meeting at the confessional.

Charles confession changed his whole life. He was set free! In November 1888, he left for the Holy Land of which he traveled through for four months. Nazareth above all appealed to him—it inspired in him an enduring love for the hidden life of nourishing the soul, and for the lowly (simple) life freely chosen. He saw and understood for the first time what "the obedience of The Faith" was about. He thought of Jesus' example for thirty years of human living, and of what Father Huvelin had once said of Jesus, "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 a call that was stirring within him--a vocation!—God was calling him to be a Trappist monk. What a completely different way of life to take! Charles knew it was a true call-- his happiness in life depended on it. 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. Now he was a new member of the religious community. The Trappist were a contemplative community, with a rich tradition.

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At thirty-two years of age, he adapted effortlessly to the tight 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: Charles said: "I wanted to enter religious life to keep Our Lord company in His sufferings..". 'I saw it as a way that Jesus could take me by the hand, and place me in His peace, and chase away my sadness, even as soon as it tried to draw near.' On June 27, 1890, Brother Alberic (Charles) 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." Charles, the monk, was ready to meet his next challenge and growth as a Catholic: to become a priest.

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PART THREE OF SIX

In parts One and Two, we looked at Charles upbringing, his eye-opening trip to Morocco, his conversion in a confession with a priest, his going to The Holy Land to ponder the life of Jesus, and his attraction to the Trappist life of priests, and his joining a Trappist community in France and then transferring to the Trappist monastery in Syria.

In 1892, a few months after taking his religious vows at the monastery in Syria, Brother Alberic (Charles) 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 head person of the Trappists) that his call to conversion had been one that kept leading to a poorer life than before, one free of the love of things, and how this persistent attraction to poverty was his life's calling. Would the life of priesthood interfere? He felt for an even poorer way of life, outside the Cistercian order. Yet, the Father Abbot counseled him that the priesthood afforded a man a unique intimacy with God. He should go to Rome for studies in a fine seminary. Obedient to the counsel, Brother Alberic (Charles) arrived at a seminary in Rome in October 1896. However, the following January, the Abbot General gave him permission to leave the Trappist order to follow God's call. Charles needed to define this new prompting in his life. He sought the poverty of Our Saviour. He changed his name from brother Alberic of the Trappist to Brother Charles of Jesus-- marking his new turn of life.

Brother Charles returned to Nazareth. It was where Jesus found his ministry calling; perhaps he could hear God most clearly in Nazareth himself. The Poor Clare Franciscan nuns (at Nazareth) took him on as a servant. He describes that time: "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." Charles then made a review of his life again before Jesus: "How much of Your mercies have 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 ...with what mercy You kept me from falling into the worst excesses by preserving my tenderness for him, (my grandfather,) 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

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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! "

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PART FOUR OF SIX

In parts one, two, and three-- we looked at Charles de Foucauld's upbringing, his falling away from his faith, his experiences in Morocco, his conversion to live for Christ, his desire to live free from material want and his joining two Trappist monasteries, his first try at seminary life, and his going to Nazareth to receive deeper understanding of his life and vocation. We were meditating on a prayer of his in Nazareth. We continue on with it:

Brother Charles prayed to God in thanksgiving for the beautiful life emerging inside of him. He writes in his journal to God: "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!"

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,

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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." Charles wore an image of the Sacred Heart to make a simple proclamation to anyone who met him. It stood for the life of Jesus and the heart of His love that could flow through the faith of sincere and devoted follower of His. It stood for a Gospel of simple but deep Love. There was no mistake about it.

YEAR OF THE PRIEST: A SIX-PART MEDITATION ON THE LIFE OF A PRIEST SAINT.

In the bulletins of 2010, we have been getting to know the life of St. Charles deFoucauld. In this last episode, we learned of his establishing a hermitage in the midst of a Muslim Sahara world. It is the early 1900's.

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PART FIVE OF SIX

In a report to the Apostolic Prefect for the Sahara, Brother Charles DeFoucauld wrote, "For the slaves (slavery being then a common practice in the desert), I have but 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 (here), with a warm welcome and a few words to incline them to goodness and to Jesus." Charles was providing, in a way, a guest house for all who would want the love of Jesus shown to them.

Not all was well in the desert town he lived: 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." He added that 'a few good Sisters of Charity here, would, in no short time and with God's help, give this whole country to Jesus.' Charles began to dream of what community life he could someday bring to this desert home. He wanted it to one day have the fraternity be called 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. 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."

Charles 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

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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 that he had delicately drawn in pen and ink on small boards, and a wooden cross that also bore a very beautiful image of Christ...

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PART SIX OF SIX

In the last episode, we heard of the tragic death of Charles. Caught in the World War II conflict, persons came to the popular priest and one shot him in the head. The life of such a great lover of God was now taken up to Heaven. The Church would have to carry on, but inspired by the example of one fine man of God.

When things were being collected of Fr. Charles deFoucauld's hermitage, the young officer uncovered a tiny monstrance in the sand that still contained the Sacred Host. He reverently picked it up, wiped it clean, and wrapped it in a cloth. When the time came to leave Tamanrasset, he put it in front of him, on the saddle of his camel, and in this manner traveled the 50 km that separated Tamanrasset from Fort Motylinski. This was the first procession of the Blessed Sacrament in the Sahara! On the way, the captain recalled a conversation he had had with Father de Foucauld: "If anything should happen to you," he asked, "what should we do with the Blessed Sacrament? You could make a perfect act of contrition and receive Communion yourself. " Summoning a sergeant that he knew had been a former seminarian and a fervent Catholic, the officer asked him to have the privilege of receiving Communion. The sergeant kneeled and received Our Lord.

This final honor to Fr. Charles would have meant a lot to him. He had devoted three and a half hours a day to the Eucharist. with three periods of silence reserved for this purpose. One reads in his diary in May 1903: "Here I am holding Jesus in my poor hands! Him, putting Himself in my hands! And here, night and day, I rejoice in the holy tabernacle where I possess Jesus, as it were, for myself! Here, every morning I consecrate the Holy Eucharist, (and) every evening I give Benediction with it!" 'And to think how little I regarded the Eucharist for a time in my young life!'

With his burning love for Jesus in the Eucharist, Brother Charles anticipated the call that the Church would be so emphasizing today, a century later. ... 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. Pope John Paul II.).

Charles de Foucauld, who was beatified in Rome on November 13, 2005 by Pope Benedict XVI, loved the Eucharist as though he saw Christ present in it with his own eyes. Blessed Charles de Foucauld, would implore us to pray in utter simplicity: O Lord, and Father Eternal, 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: Jesus Christ." Amen.