

## **Charles de Foucauld, the Mission in the desert of today**

An interview with Cardinal Walter Kasper, on the mission of Brother Charles for today. Within the year de Foucauld will be declared blessed. In 1905, just one hundred years ago, he reached Tamanrasset, his final destination, in the Algerian desert. I know the person of de Foucauld is dear to you and has a special place in your life as a Christian and priest. How did you come across him?

WALTER KASPER: At the time when I was professor of Theology at the University of Tübingen I often met a group of priests who were members and friends of the “Jesus Caritas” community, priests who followed the spirituality of Charles de Foucauld. I usually joined their monthly gatherings, which consisted of various sections: *révision de vie*, reading and contemplation of Holy Writ, eucharistic celebration and adoration and, finally, a brotherly supper. Fascinated by the figure of Charles de Foucauld, I also went to Algeria, up into the mountains of the Hoggar, where in his time he had lived, and there, in a simple hut in the solitude of the mountain, I made my spiritual exercises. I remember that every evening a little mouse with bright little eyes would visit to get a bit of my bread. There in Tamanrasset, but also elsewhere, for example in Nazareth or here in Rome, I have always been struck by the life of the Little Sisters of Charles de Foucauld, their life in evangelical poverty among the poor and their life of eucharistic adoration. In getting a better understanding of the spirituality of Charles de Foucauld the writings of René Voillaume have been a great help; some aspects of that spirituality also come into my book *Jesus the Christ*.

Br Charles Beni Abbes

In those years in which you participated in the gatherings of the “Jesus Caritas” groups, what struck you about de Foucauld? Why did you find his life interesting and relevant?

KASPER: I met that group of priests in a house of Franciscan nuns a little outside Tübingen, in a very beautiful area. I was moved by the genuine evangelical spirituality, a spirituality of Nazareth, a spirituality of silence, of listening to the Word of God, of eucharistic adoration, of the simplicity of life and of brotherly exchange. Later I understood the relevance and the exemplary nature of the testimony of Charles de Foucauld for Christians and Christianity in the world of today. Charles de Foucauld seemed interesting to me as a model for achieving the mission of Christians and of the Church not just in the desert of Tamanrasset but also in the desert of the modern world: the mission through simple Christian presence, in prayer with God and in friendship with men.

Judging by the immediate results, de Foucauld looks like a loser. During his life in the desert there were no conversions to Christianity among the Tuareg. What does the reproposal of his story suggest now?

KASPER: The Jewish philosopher and theologian Martin Buber has said that success is not one of the names of God. Jesus Christ also in his earthly life did not have success; at the end he died on the cross and his disciples, except John and his mother Mary, distanced themselves and abandoned him. Humanly speaking, Good Friday was a failure. The experience of Good Friday is a part of the life of every saint and every Christian. That fact can be a comfort to many priests who suffer the want of immediate success, because throughout our western world, despite all the pastoral efforts made, the churches are ever emptier on Sundays and society more dechristianized. Many have the impression of preaching to deaf ears. In such a difficult situation, the example of Charles de Foucauld can be of great help to many priests.

In what way is that help expressed?

KASPER: We can learn that it is not a matter of our mission or, so to speak, of our missionary enterprise, of a cultural hegemony or of a widening of an ecclesial empire through sophisticated and finely tuned strategies of pedagogy, psychology, organization or any other method. Certainly, we must do what we can and we can also use modern methods. But in the end it's the mission of God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. We are only the recipient and the tool through which God wants to be present; in the end it's He who must touch the heart of the other; only He can convert the heart and open the eyes and ears. So, in presence, in prayer, in the simple life, in service and in human friendship, like that which Charles de Foucauld lived with the Tuareg, the Lord himself is present and working. We must trust to Him and leave to Him the choice of how, when and where he wants to convince others and gather his people.

In Tamanrasset

That was what de Foucauld saw happen in his own personal life.

KASPER: In a meditation of November 1897 he wrote: «It was your work, Lord, and yours only... You, my Jesus, my savior, you did it all, within me and outside of me. You drew me to virtue with the beauty of a soul in which virtue seemed so beautiful to me as to irrevocably steal my heart... You drew me to truth with the beauty of that same soul». Certainly we can't make Charles de Foucauld the only model of the mission for all situations; there are also other exemplary saints, such as Francis Xavier, Daniele Comboni, for example and many

others, who represent another type and another missionary charism. Missionary situations are multifarious and so are the challenges and the responses. However Charles de Foucauld seems to me to be a model for the mission not only in the desert among the Moslems but also in the modern desert. It's emblematic that Teresa of Lisieux was proclaimed patron saint of the missions, she, a young Carmelite nun, who never left the convent and was never in a mission country; yet she promised to let fall a shower of roses from heaven after her death.

Calls to the mission are by no means broadcast rarely. Yet they often sound abstract if not even tiresome.

KASPER: We Christians are also children of our time; we want to plan, do, organize, check the results... Charles de Foucauld suggests a different approach for us: imitating and living the life of Jesus in Nazareth. One might ask oneself: Jesus, thirty years of hidden life in Nazareth out of thirty-three, was that wasted time maybe? In reality, precisely daily reality, ordinary reality is the true public space where the gift of the Christian life is manifested. Here we may wish to recall an important passage in the dogmatic constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, in paragraph 31, where the Council speaks about the mission of the laity and says that the laity are believers who live in the world, that is in everyday conditions such as work and other daily activities. «There, in the everyday conditions of their daily life, they make Christ visible through the radiance of the faith, of hope and of charity». Sometimes we have the mistaken idea that to be a layman engaged in the mission one must be an ecclesiastical functionary, who participates as far as possible in the priest's tasks, makes himself actively visible in the liturgy, etc. But the most important thing is living the Gospel in daily life, in prayer, in charity, in patience, in suffering, being brother to all and being convinced – as Saint Paul says – that the Word of God, if taken up and lived by us, spreads and convinces.

A great many people acknowledge that Christians have fallen into the minority. But they say that for that very reason there is a need to get busy, be creative, renew our activity. Does that view persuade you?

KASPER: It persuades me yes and no. Yes, if Christians wake up, becoming aware of their situation, of the new challenges and of their mission. We can't be satisfied with the status quo and go on as if nothing were happening. This is true for Western Europe in particular, which is going through a profound identity crisis, while once it was clearly marked by Christianity. Europe must wake up from its indifference, which is a false tolerance. But, on the other hand, there is the risk of behaving like the propagandists of a minority or a sectarian lobby. In this sense, no to militant fanaticism as we encounter it in many old and

new sects, that have today become a new challenge throughout the world. Especially after Vatican Council II, we need to engage in dialogue, that is, an attitude of respect also toward those who are described as distant, who may have a slim, but resistant bond, with the Church, and an attitude of respect toward modern culture, whose legitimate autonomy was recognized by the Council itself. We don't want and we cannot impose the faith, that by its nature cannot be imposed; we want – as Vatican Council II says in the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes* in paragraph 1 – to share the joys and hopes, the sadnesses and anguishes of mankind, of the poor above all and of all those who suffer, and, through this life of sharing, give witness of our faith.

Brother Charles with Moussa in Tamanrasset

And de Foucauld comes in there also?

KASPER: It was an attitude that characterized Charles de Foucauld. Enough to think of his friendship with the Tuareg, and above all with their chieftain Moussa ag Amastan. He did nothing to persuade and make proselytes. The most he could do was to make Christ himself accessible, bringing the tabernacle into the desert. But then he didn't conceive elaborate strategies. He simply lived his life of prayer and work. Only after his death did he find followers, followers who today live among the poorest sharing their daily experiences.

Recently, in the debates on the Christian roots of Europe, even some lay thinkers have reproached the Church with timidity in defending and offering truth and values. How do you assess the criticism? And what would de Foucauld have said of it?

KASPER: The criticism often made against the Church is certainly not as a whole well-founded; the Pope and many European episcopates have spoken clearly and energetically in favor of the Christian identity of Europe. But at the same time it's true that in some milieu and circles within the Church there is a certain timidity and weakness in defending and proposing Christian truth and the values. This attitude often springs from a fragile faith that has lost its certainties, its determination, that confuses tolerance with indifference. Charles de Foucauld did not shout big slogans: his behavior arose out of a quite different conviction. He started from a solid and lived faith, that in itself, even without big words, was strong and courageous, but also humble, witness to the Christian message and its values. Without claims to ownership, without an attitude of challenge. At the end of 1910 he wrote: «Jesus suffices. There where he is, nothing lacks. Who relies on him is strong with his invincible strength». Witness like that can induce others to reflect, to ask themselves questions, can stir admiration and, if God grants the grace, even the desire to share this life according to Christian values. In fact, our defense of the Christian identity of

Europe will be convincing only if we live the values that we defend. It isn't the words, it's the life that convinces. As de Foucauld recognized in something he wrote in July 1899, «One does good with what one is, much more than with what one says... One does good when one is of God, belongs to Him!». And when that happens, one doesn't need to invent anything else. It's enough «to stay where one is, to let the graces of God penetrate, grow and consolidate in the soul, defend oneself from agitation».

The asking of forgiveness for past sins has also been judged by some as an expression of weakness. How do you see that, in the light of the person of de Foucauld?

KASPER: Charles de Foucauld was right to ask forgiveness for his wasted life before his conversion. He shows us that a new beginning is always possible, through divine grace. We, too, at each eucharistic celebration begin with a penitential act; something that would be completely unimaginable at a political gathering, or that of a company or any other grouping. By so doing we express our weakness, which is an act of sincerity, but at the same time we manifest the strength of the Christian message of mercy and forgiveness, that is, of the possibility that God can bring about a change and give a new start even to a human history without a way out and without hope. De Foucauld wrote in one of his meditations: «There is no sinner so great, nor criminal so hardened, to whom you don't loudly offer Heaven, as you gave it to the Good Thief, for the cost of an instant of goodwill». To ask forgiveness is not a weakness but a strength; it is expression of a hope that does not forget, does not renege on or disavow the past and that at the same time doesn't feel chained to the past and can look to the future. Asking forgiveness is the expression of Christian freedom, freedom that we know in Christ. Asking forgiveness is not a politically correct act but has to do with the nature of the Church and with its message.

Charles among the Tuareg

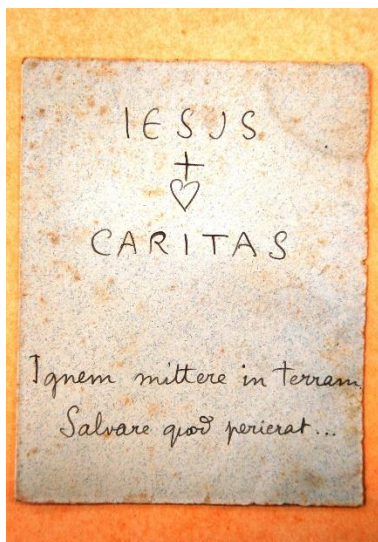
What do the Tuareg of the Algeria have in common with us men who live in cities?

KASPER: De Foucauld brings Jesus Christ among «those who do not seek him». It's not wrong to say that, in some aspects, the situation of the Tuareg of Algeria is similar to that of our contemporaries in the cities, that is, to our own situation, even if the difference is glaring at first sight; with them it's about material poverty, with us of spiritual poverty. The desert is certainly different. But the thing in common consists of the fact that neither they nor we are really "at home" anywhere; we are wayfarers, we are nomads. We also have in common a certain lethargy. We often roam without a precise destination and a solid hope. We are thus a people with whom the preaching of the Gospel and conversion is difficult. In this situation, Charles de Foucauld gives us a prophetic but also demanding answer, at bottom the only possible answer: an evangelical life that manifests the prophetic alternative

of the Gospel, making it interesting and attractive again. Thus Charles de Foucauld is a luminous figure, and can also be a legitimate counterpoise to the danger of an embourgeoisement and of a boring trivialization of the Church.

For de Foucauld the promise of Christ was particularly addressed to the poor. Don't you think that this perception of the predilection of the poor has faded?

KASPER: The poor and wretched are according to Jesus the best-beloved of God and those to whom his evangelization is particularly addressed. Saint Paul also tells us that in the early communities there were few rich, few wise men, few powerful persons and few nobles. Vatican Council II retrieved and emphasized this aspect; since the Council a preferential option for the poor has been much spoken about. Liberation theology took its inspiration from this message, but at times instrumentalized it for ideological purposes; by so doing, it has become ambiguous. That doesn't mean, however, that the message is no longer valid and relevant. On the contrary. The great majority of mankind is currently living below the poverty threshold, and that is true above all in Africa, where Charles de Foucauld lived, among the poor. So we hope that his beatification will highlight in an absolutely non-ideological sense the urgent need to deal with the challenge of poverty, both material and spiritual, and show us the evangelical response, lived by him in exemplary fashion, that the world now must give.



Colloquium of Viviers, July 13-15, 2001, on Charles de Foucauld