

THE LEGACY OF CHARLES DE FOUCAULD

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THIS stimulating and provocative book¹ is an adaptation of the latest French edition of *Au Coeur des Masses*, for which Willard Hill deserves to be congratulated, because the reader is hardly conscious that the greater part of the text is a translation. It is definitely a book which ought to be on the shelves of every religious community, and read aloud in every refectory. But, like the disciples of Charles de Foucauld themselves, there is nothing violent about these seeds blown from the Sahara. They might be compared to a spiritual atomic bomb, likely to have far-reaching effects on the religious state in years to come. In a long introductory chapter Père Voillaume sets forth what are the ideals of the Little Brothers of Jesus. These may be summed up as trying to live as poor religious, and contributing to the Church's invisible apostolate by 'entering into Jesus's work of redemption', through prayer and sacrifice; what is more, without any enclosure—small groups actually 'inserted' into the world of the poor, sharing the hard life of that world. These groups are composed of priests and other brothers who are not ordained. There is absolutely no social distinction between them. We are reminded that Pope Pius XII, when approving of the form of life embodied in the Secular Institutes, solemnly recognized that it is possible for some persons to pursue evangelical perfection while remaining in the world, and that by this general recognition of a new form of the religious state showed that Charles de Foucauld was a prophet whose doctrines had nothing heretical about them.

It is the contemplative spirit of the Little Brothers of Jesus that most Catholics find it hard to understand—the stress made that they do not try to *do* any good. So what apostolic purpose is actually served, and what is their place in the Church's visible apostolate? This is the answer given by Père Voillaume: 'The

¹ *Seeds of the Desert*. By R. Voillaume, Prior General of the Little Brothers of Jesus. With a Preface by the Most Rev. David Mathew, Archbishop of Apamea. (Burns and Oates; 16s.)

apostolic means utilized by the disciples of Father de Foucauld are, first and foremost, everything that has been designated by the term "the poorer means". Though more difficult to define as means, means of this sort are none the less effective; I would even say that they are absolutely necessary to the Church's existence. Were the Church merely an administrative organization entrusted with dispensing the teachings, propagating the faith and distributing the sacraments, it would have no need of these "poorer means". But the Church is a *body* living by a life, whose mystery is something beyond us all. Its growth is no less one of depth in souls than of outward extension in numbers. It may well be, in fact, that the greater of the two dimensions is not its breadth but its depth. In this latter dimension, the Church defies all measurement, lends itself to no statistics, however highly developed; and the principal work before the Fraternities perhaps lies in furthering its increase in this dimension.'

'We members of the clergy and apostles are often faced with the risk of judging the value of an apostolic means by its visible and immediately computable results, whereas the true efficacy can no more be reduced to figures than can the growth of the Church in depth. Suppose someone had tried to register the immediate results of Christ's own action at the time. They would, I think, have had little cause for encouragement. The Apostles themselves were so disappointed by the apparent failure of the Passion that they lost faith in their mission. We are from time to time usefully reminded of the truth of this by the lives of certain saints.'

Such being the basic principles of the spirit of the Little Brothers of Jesus, the next thing to stress is that they try to make themselves brothers and sisters to the poor *by belonging to their social stratum in every way*. They set out to belong to the environment of the poor of the entire world. This involves the obligation for the brothers to work for their living, and also *never to accept alms*. It affects their housing, care in case of illness, manner of dress, and, in fact, their whole manner of living.

Père Voillaume reminds us that Charles de Foucauld wished his followers to be 'universal Little Brothers'—all things to all men, above all the 'little people of no importance in this world; groups which no one thinks about, first of all, the nomadic peoples, who cannot be reached with the normal means of evangelization'. The very fact that these religious undertake no organized works of

mercy and charity, makes it easier for them to penetrate into countries and places where regular missionaries would be banned.

Within twenty years of their foundation, the Little Brothers and Sisters of Jesus have established fraternities which have integrated themselves rapidly with their particular environments—'coloured brothers and white brothers, united in real friendship, living and working together on a footing of absolute equality. . . . Either brothers or sisters have gone amongst the Indians of South America, to Indo-China, or to India. Some brothers have adopted certain Oriental rites—the Byzantine, the Coptic, the Syrian, the Chaldean and the Armenian—and thus prepared themselves to become factors of fraternal union with their Latin brothers. The lands of Islam have also seen Little Brothers come to bear witness to friendship between Christian and Moslem in all sympathy and mutual respect. Elsewhere Fraternities have entered into frequent friendly contact with Protestant circles. Both brothers [and sisters] have been accepted for admittance into the State of Israel in token of friendship.'

As we have hinted already, this book is nothing if not provocative. Chapter II, entitled 'Nazareth as a form of the Religious Life', needs to be read slowly, since it supplies more than enough material for a serious examination of conscience on what are the essential and non-essential features of the religious state. Père Voillaume reminds us that 'one of the most important achievements of contemporary Christianity is to have awakened consciousness of the fact that sanctity, total sanctity, is attainable in everyday life. The various Catholic Action movements have produced types of Christians whose inner life sometimes surpasses that of some priests and religious. Comparisons of this kind have had some share in the falling-off in respect of the religious status. . . . Rightly or wrongly, the conclusions drawn from this experience—though without always sufficiently discerning the real causes for the situation—have been unfavourable to the religious life. And yet the religious status cannot be affected by criticism that can only pertain to false conceptions of it or to imperfect or antiquated methods of training.'

Having summarized the rapid changes in general conditions of life in the world which have taken place in the past half-century, and more particularly since the second world war, Père Voillaume

goes on to say that 'on the other hand, a fairly large number of religious communities have remained unaffected by these conditions and as if sheltered from the changes going on outside—though quite involuntarily on their part. Very few religious in their monasteries and convents have been called upon to lead anything like a hard, let alone a heroic, life; rather have they been preserved from the harshness of life today by the very rhythm of their existence. It would be difficult to admit that this has been a privilege, from the standpoint of the life of the Gospel. There is therefore some basis in fact for the over-severe judgment of a great many people as regards the life led by certain religious. Where, then, do the causes of the situation lie?'

To understand what are these causes we cannot do better than to give them in Père Voillaume's own words. 'The rapid evolution of people's minds today, the new ways of thinking resulting from the shaking-up which people have undergone since 1939, ought to have been met with a certain adaptation of religious observances and means to perfection to the new needs. This adaptation has not taken place as it should have, and it would seem as if the very slow change occurring in certain sides of the religious life had been considerably outdistanced by changes in the modern world. Yet there have been periods in the history of the Church where change in people's way of thinking—no doubt less rapid, and this is our time's excuse—has been matched with fresh flowerings of the religious life in perfectly adapted forms: witness the monachism of the early centuries, the Mendicant Orders in the thirteenth century, St Ignatius and the Jesuits, and the charitable congregations of the sixteenth century.

'Due to the excessive proliferation of methods, in themselves excellent, many minds have, with time, been led into something almost resembling collusion with "pious exercises", thus confusing these with the essence of the religious life to a point where the abuse of these practices has resulted in masking the true nature of evangelical perfection to the detriment of the basic Christian virtues.'

These ideas are elaborated in a long footnote, which is worth quoting because it helps us to understand better just how the Little Brothers and Sisters of Jesus differ from the older religious orders and congregations. 'In order to avoid misunderstanding, I feel it necessary to add that what I am questioning here is not the value

of classical observances as such, but only their value in relation to a particular form of the religious life. I however submit that, if one were to go to the bottom of things, one would find that one of the reasons why religious orders and monasteries and convents are something which many people today consider incomprehensible, is because they present themselves as systems of observances and usages and styles of living which are not simply Christian or religious but bear the marks of the culture and usages of society in the time when the different forms of the religious life came into being. Take, for instance, the character and cut of the costume (especially noticeable with women's orders, with the starched head-dress, the excessively full skirts, etc., sometimes used), the over-grand style of certain monasteries, the way the religious sleep, and the habits as regards hygiene and cleanliness, the etiquette, and even a certain manner of approaching the relations of the religious to each other, etc. The very stability of the religious life has, of course, contributed to the conservation of the smallest details, all of which moreover possess their religious significance and spiritual value. It must, indeed, be admitted that the observances and usages making up the whole complex are eminently capable *in themselves* of serving as instruments for the pursuit of perfection. They are the fruit of long experience and have been proven by time. Their efficacy, however, may very well decrease with the tendencies in the evolution of society (for example, in matters of dress and etiquette). Monastic usage still retains its quality and efficacy, but this is more and more the case only with those who are initiated into the particular kind of society constituted by the monastery, which is infinitely farther removed from the surrounding environment than it was at the time of its foundation. For it is certain that if St Benedict or St Francis, let us say, had had their forms of the religious life to institute in the twentieth century, the usages and observances they would have adopted would have been different from what they are, while having equal efficacy and equal force of expression. A Trappist or a Carthusian, *inter alia*, may—even at the present time—feel none of this need for readaptation, if his mentality has been thoroughly fashioned to the culture corresponding to the Trappist or Carthusian style of life. The spiritual life, however deep, can flower here quite as genuinely as at the time of the founders. But this will mean that one has been successful in adapting oneself, and it has become more and more

difficult for increasing numbers of men and women to envisage doing this. In any event, the religious life is definitely hampered in radiating the Gospel by this cultural gap between the monastery and the world outside.'

Most of us have taken for granted that a 'cultural gap between the monastery and the world outside' is an essential feature of the purely contemplative form of the religious life. How could it have been otherwise? For we were dependent on mental pictures of monasteries planned like those of the middle ages, secluded in the depth of the countryside and far from the madding crowd. We have visualized tonsured monks—Benedictine, Cistercian, Carthusian and Camaldolese—garbed in flowing robes of medieval pattern; whose mannerisms and observances helped to create a romantic atmosphere. When we visited such monasteries the glamour has been intensified by the centuries-old music of plainchant; the hieratic ceremonial in choir; the magnificence of pontifical high Mass and Vespers on some great festival; the church heavy with the fumes of incense. We have watched the silent hooded figures rapt in prayer or engaged in various forms of manual labour, wondering if they can belong to our own era. Or we have perhaps tended to think of the contemplative life in terms of Carmelite and Poor Clare convents—even more mysterious and alien to the modern world than an enclosed community of men, because in these institutions the nuns are hidden and invisible behind curtains and grilles, literally voluntary prisoners.

With devastating French logic, Père Voillaume shows us that the purely contemplative life *can* and *ought* to exist quite independent of such externals. He conveys the impression that the Little Brothers of Jesus are a sort of half-way house between the classical conception of the religious life and the quite recent conception of the Secular Institutes, which have now been recognized by the Holy See as a canonical state of perfection, in virtue of the Apostolic Constitution, *Provida Mater Ecclesia* (1947), and the *Motu proprio, Primo feliciter* (1948).

Parts Three and Four of this book are made up of chapters devoted to the vocation of the Little Brothers of Jesus and the religious life of the fraternities. We can visualize these small groups of from three to five brothers living together in conditions that would horrify the average monk or nun—usually 'the most ordinary sort of flat in some poor neighbourhood, or in a more or

less dilapidated house in some thickly-populated street, or a mere shelter like the one in the Barbary Mountains. The brothers seldom have rooms to themselves, and so have to make out as best they can.' One room is always set apart as the chapel—simple to the point of bareness, but always the centre and heart of each fraternity. 'Early each morning, the brothers say Lauds together, meditate on the Gospel, and hear Mass before going off to work. Whenever possible they return to the chapel in the course of the day. On coming back from their work at night, they meet again for Vespers and their hour of adoration before the Blessed Sacrament and, before going to bed, say Compline together. One night a week (usually Thursday) they also get up for an hour's adoration.'

For, as has been stated already, the mission of the disciples of Charles de Foucauld is before all else a mission of prayer, adoration and intercession for all mankind, but especially for those amongst whom they live and work and to whom their lives are therefore dedicated. Their spirit of holy poverty is basically different to that of the older monastic orders or even of the Franciscans, because they are not allowed to accept alms, still less to hold property or to benefit by invested funds. Mendicancy is almost a mortal sin to a Little Brother of Jesus! He is bound to earn his living in one way or another, just like the poor layfolk around him. If he gets ill, he does what they do—avails himself of the benefits of the Welfare State! If a working fraternity cannot be self-supporting, then there is no justification for its existence. It has to be closed down and another opened in a place where paid jobs can be found. If the brothers find that there is any money left over after essential expenses have been met, they are bound by their rule to give it away to someone less well off than they are; in other words, they must only keep what they cannot get along without. Nevertheless hospitality is a strong point of the rule, for we read: 'there must be no hesitancy about entertaining friends and visitors, serving a better meal on a feast day or in celebration of the arrival of a brother, etc., and catching up the next day by being a little more careful, as workers' families do'.

So after reading this fascinating book we can picture the members of this new religious institute 'doing the most varied sorts of work, side by side with and outwardly indistinguishable from their fellow workers, except for the badge they wear on their

breasts—a small cross with a heart in the centre of it, the inspiration for which has been drawn from the larger cross and heart which Brother Charles wore on his Saharan *gandoura*. They will work, for instance, as they have done or still do, in France, Belgium, North Africa and the Near East, as masons, miners, carpenters, house-painters, ditch diggers, mechanics, fitters, lorry (or truck) drivers or factory hands in foundries, wool or cotton mills, and petrol (or oil) refineries. They will work also, say, amongst the poorest of the poor workers of the cities of North Africa, as dock-hands in the ports, street-cleaners in the old Arab sections, etc. Some have undertaken to cultivate a piece of barren land amongst the husbandmen of a Berber mountain tribe, while others have joined the nomads of the High Plateaux of Algeria, living in the black wool tent characteristic of the *Ouled* (sons) of Sidi Cheikh and leading the life of primitive austerity of the herdsman and camel tender. The rugged life of the deep-sea fishermen off the coasts of Brittany has attracted several of the brothers in their desire to devote themselves to that class of toilers whose occupation so often keeps them apart from both Church and priest.'

As Archbishop Mathew points out in his Preface to this book: 'Charles de Foucauld himself had a frankness and openness of character after which we must strive. The spiritual life described in this volume cannot be pursued except with candour; here energy goes hand-in-hand with a deep trust in Providence. A sense of dependence upon God and a faithful trust in him may come from the desert as it came to the solitary of Hoggar Tamarrasset. In this God-centred life, with the chapel as the focal point of each poor house, men can become united with the unprivileged and the outcast. Those in the world around us can be regained from tedium and indifference and lack of faith if those working beside them can show exactly how our Saviour lived by their own example of poverty and endurance. There has never been a time when it has been more necessary to prove to our contemporaries that we are indeed the sons and servants of a Crucified Master.'

