



BLESSED CHARLES DE FOUCAULD

DECEMBER 1ST

On January 26, 1999, I had the privilege of attending a youth rally with Pope Saint John Paul II in my hometown of St. Louis. It was the first and only time I would ever see him in person. As we waited for the Holy Father's arrival, we sang again and again the theme song that had been written for the occasion: "Cry the Gospel." Only later did I learn that these words were taken from the famous saying of Blessed Charles de Foucauld: "Cry out the Gospel with your life."

Born in Strasbourg, France, in 1858, Blessed Charles lost his faith as an adolescent, and it was not until he witnessed the faith of Muslims in Morocco in 1883 that he began to utter the simple prayer, "My God, if you exist, let me come to know you." Just a few years later, in 1886, at the age of 28, he found his way back to God. Recalling that moment, he said, "As soon as I believed in God, I understood that I could not do otherwise than to live for him alone."

A pilgrimage to the Holy Land solidified his personal vocation – to live the "spirituality of Nazareth." This spirituality is characterized by a focus on the Incarnation, on the Son of God made flesh in order to be present to His people. After his priestly ordination at the age of 43, Blessed Charles spent the rest of his life in the Sahara Desert, desiring to be present to "the furthest removed, the most abandoned." "I would like to be sufficiently good," he said, "that people would say, 'If such is the servant, what must the Master be like?'" The call to total dedication to Christ, which he desired after his conversion, was fulfilled when he died at the hands of marauders in 1916.

Blessed Charles knew well that the priest is called to extend Christ's Incarnational presence to the people of every time and place. He desired not so much to preach with his words as to live the kind of life – in and through his body – that would lead others to look at him and see Christ. As Pope Saint John Paul II teaches in the Theology of the Body, "The body, in fact, and only the body, is capable of making visible what is invisible: the spiritual and the divine" (TOB 19:4). For this reason, Christ instituted the ministerial priesthood, so that after His Ascension, He could still be bodily present to His people. This is the very mission of the priest – to be an *alter Christus*, another Christ.

In his book on Blessed Charles' spirituality of Nazareth, Father Emmanuel Asi writes, "Nazareth is one of the best models of spirituality for diocesan priests and for Christian disciples. The characters therein manifest a very active, yet a very contemplative (not monastic) life." Through a deeply contemplative life, the fruit of which is intimacy with Christ, the priest's very life begins to more perfectly reflect the life of Christ. People begin to look to him and, without his even saying a word, recognize the Incarnational presence of Christ in the world today.

Just as Blessed Charles experienced his call as nothing but a total gift of himself to Christ and the Church, so the priest today must recognize that he is called to give everything in his vocation and ministry. From the moment his face hits the floor of the cathedral in prostration at his ordination to his dying breath, the priest is "on call." The priest gives himself, as Blessed Charles did, not for some theory or idea, but for a person, Jesus Christ, and for His bride, Holy Mother Church.

Blessed Charles once said, "Everything about us, all that we are, should 'proclaim the Gospel from the housetops.' All that we do and our whole lives should be an example of what the Gospel way of life means in practice, and should make it unmistakably clear that we belong to Jesus. Our entire being should be a living witness, a reflection of Jesus." What a beautiful summary of what it means to be a priest. We priests would do well to take these words deeply into our hearts and then to strive to live them more perfectly each day, so that through us, and through our bodies, Christ might still be present to His people.



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