

BROTHER TO ALL

The Life and Witness
of St. Charles de Foucauld

Edited by

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Introduction

Dear Brothers and Sisters:

This volume is dedicated to the life and legacy of Charles de Foucauld (1858–1916), a hermit and contemplative who died in a remote village in Algeria. At the time of his death, he was quite obscure. His dream of attracting followers was unfulfilled. And yet in time his story and his model of spirituality attracted interest and followers around the world. Many believe his model of contemplative life and “presence” among people of other faiths makes him one of the great spiritual teachers of our time. Beatified in 2005, he was canonized as a saint in 2022. Even before this event, Pope Francis singled him out in 2020 in his encyclical *Fratelli tutti* as a model of “fraternity and social friendship.”

The contributors to this volume include contemporary students and followers of Charles de Foucauld, both scholars, missionaries, religious, and lay people, all exploring aspects of his life and message, and attempting to assess his inspiration and meaning for our times. At the outset, I invite you to listen to the words of Cardinal Walter Kasper, as he emphasizes the exemplary relevance of Charles de Foucauld for Christians and Christianity in the world of today. He said: “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 [and women].”

Charles lived in a small hermitage in a remote village in the desert of North Africa, attempting to emulate the “hidden life” of Jesus in his years as a carpenter in Nazareth. The vast expanses of the desert can both amaze and frighten us. Both the silence

and the whistling winds can inspire us and raise our hearts and minds toward our creator. The oases one may find among the shifting sand dunes may fill us with hope. Yet the words of Cardinal Kasper remind us there are other deserts in our contemporary world. They may not involve literal sand dunes, but in other ways men and women today live disconnected from one another. While we are created to care for one another, we fail to nourish the “culture of care.” Foucauld, in contrast, lived that “culture of care” as a universal brother by living as a brother to men and women in the desert. He himself became a human oasis by his presence and friendship among his neighbors. We too are called to do the same in whatever deserts we inhabit.

Foucauld’s life ended in the desert in a painful way. It might appear to readers that his life ended in failure. He neither “converted” anyone nor “attracted” followers. His story was not a story of success in terms of the “missionary mindset” of his times, or even of our own day. Reflecting on the apparent failure of Foucauld, Cardinal Kasper says: “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.”

Foucauld remained a hidden treasure for many years after his death, until a few men and women began to learn about his spirituality and drew inspiration from his witness. Today several religious communities of men and women as well as lay associations follow his spirituality. These men and women bring to the world a new dimension of service with their presence, love, and care. Elsewhere what Pope Francis said in a conversation with Austen Ivereigh is applicable to the mission of the spiritual sons and daughters of Foucauld: “The Church’s role is played out in the service of the Lord and the peoples of the earth where she is

sent, not by imposing or dominating but as Christ does, in the washing of feet.” This is a message that applies to all Christians, whatever their setting or condition.

There is another aspect of Foucauld’s example that bears special relevance today: specifically, his invitation to live among Muslims in friendship and solidarity, as brothers and sisters. Foucauld’s own religious conversion was deeply inspired by the example of Muslim piety, and his life calls us to appreciate how many of our Muslim brothers and sisters “continuously live in the presence of God,” our Creator and Master. For those who have come to know and appreciate our Muslim brothers and sisters it is very painful to see how the richness and immense resources of the Islamic tradition are ignored, distorted, and disdained by so many Christians today. This is another way in which Foucauld’s message challenges us today, and his example is of great help to many Christians who engage with Muslims.

This is a particularly urgent challenge where I live, in India, which is passing through critical times: politically, socially, and religiously. The politico-religious narratives marked by exclusion, hatred, and discrimination continue to push India into a quicksand of communal disharmony. More than ever we need the example of men and women like Mahatma Gandhi and Mother Teresa, whose narratives of nonviolence and compassion are real antidotes to violence and hatred.

Pope Francis, in his encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, On Fraternity and Social Friendship, described Charles de Foucauld as one such person whose deep faith, drawing from his intense experience of God, “made a journey of transformation toward feeling a brother to all.” Pope Francis reminds us that Blessed [now Saint] Charles prayed for the grace that he be a brother to every human being and asked a friend to ‘pray to God that I truly be the brother of all.’” The pope writes: “He wanted to be, in the end, ‘the universal brother.’ Yet only by identifying with the least did he come at last to be the brother of all. May God inspire that dream in each one of us.”

In their various ways, the contributors to this volume have been inspired by that dream. May their reflections help to inspire others to learn more about this great saint of our time, and so to pursue their own dreams.

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