

Brother Charles

During this session we'll try to meet someone, and through that person try to meet a certain image of God.

Brother Charles' life is like a fountain of living water for us. We don't live off reserves. A fountain is something you have to keep coming back to because thirst is something that keeps coming back. After you've quenched your thirst the fountain doesn't stop spouting. And you're not sad about that. You can't drink the whole thing! But what is important is that you keep coming back when you're thirsting again. The fountain will always be waiting for you, spouting new life. You meet it according to the thirst that is within you. That's how it is with the life of our founders. You have to keep coming back to them with all the thirsts of the different stages of your life. They won't say the same thing to you when you're 20 as when you're 50 or 70 or 90!

So who was Br Charles?

He was born September 15 1858 in a city called Strasbourg that is in the east of France on the German border. There have been many wars between Germany and France over that border and Strasbourg was sometimes a French city, sometimes a German city. Br Charles, L Sr Magdeleine and Fr Voillaume all come from this area and so that gives weight to what they have to tell us about living together as human beings, beyond any borders or barriers that people raise



between themselves.

His last name *de Foucauld* express his aristocratic origins. He is a Vicomte, born into a society where class divisions matter a great deal. His roots are among the ruling class.

When he speaks about his family he speaks of bittersweet memories. Sweet because he comes from a family where there was love. Bitter because his parents will both die very young. Two years before his birth his parents had had a little boy whom they named Charles but who only lived a few months. A younger sister called Marie was born 18 months after him. He always calls her Mimi.

He always remembers his mother with great tenderness. We have several of her drawings and Br Charles certainly inherited her gift. She did one drawing of him in his father's arms, probably on the day he was baptized. Charles will remember that it was his mother who first taught him to love God.

From infancy I was surrounded by so many graces, son of a holy mother who taught me to know you, to love you and to pray to you as soon as I could babble. Isn't my earliest memory that

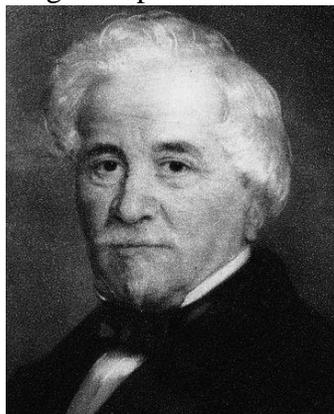
of the prayer she taught me to say every evening: “My God bless Daddy, Mommy, grandfather, grandmother, grandmother Foucauld and little sister?”



It’s a prayer that must have marked him deeply because he was still very young when his father became sick. He had worked in forest management but when Charles was only 4 years old he began to show signs of mental illness and had to be sent to a psychiatric hospital in Paris. The mother was devastated and herself became ill. She died in March 1864 before his 6th birthday. It’s unclear what she died from. The doctor simply wrote “neuralgia” on her death certificate.

Her dying words were, “My God may your will be done”, words that were chiseled onto her tombstone. So you can imagine how deeply the words of the prayer of Abandonment resonate in his life. “Let only your will be done in me and in all creatures”

The two orphans are going to be raised by their maternal grandfather, Colonel de Morelt, 68 years old. Their mother had been his only child and he will treat the two with great tenderness. But that tenderness will go the point of softness with Charles who would have needed someone



with a firmer hand.

He used to spend his summers with his Aunt Ines, his late father’s sister. A famous French painter called Ingres did a portrait of Ines Moitessier that today hangs in a museum in London. Her husband was a very wealthy banker. Aunt Ines had two daughters, Catherine and Marie, who, after her marriage will become Marie de Bondy. She was 7 years older than Charles and became a bit of a mother figure for him. They became very close during her 19th birthday and afterwards they started writing to each other, a correspondence that will last all their lives.

When he was 12 years old war broke out again between France and Germany. It was a consequence of the wars Napoleon had led in the rest of Europe. France will lose and Strasbourg will again become a German city. Rather than give up his French citizenship, Charles's grandfather chose to leave the city. At 12 years old, Charles had lost his parents, his house, his school, his friends and his mother's grave. All of that will mark him. The family will travel around for 8 months before settling in Nancy where he will spend his adolescence. Later on he will often meditate on the Holy Family's flight into Egypt. It's surely rooted in his personal experience. In Nancy he has a very dear friend with whom he will write all his life long. His name is Gabriel Tourdes.

As a Trappist he will write to him,

*My dear Gabriel, At the Trappists we don't write. You know that. But for friends like you there is an exception...I should say for a friend like you...because do we have many of them? Blessed he who has one! With whom else do I have so many shared childhood memories from Strasbourg and memories of teenage years in Nancy? With whom else have I gone around as much as with you, or read as much with as with you? And you too don't have another friend like me; our lives were gently woven together during our youth and these ties are so solid that there have never been others that were stronger...and therefore I asked my superior for permission to write to you, telling him that you were not a friend but **the** friend, someone completely special for me...And since convent life doesn't shrink your heart but widens it, there was no hesitation about granting my request.*

We have more than 40 letters written by Charles to Gabriel before his conversion and they allow us to know him as a youth.

At 16 years old he was sent to Paris to study in a school run by the Jesuits. It prepared students for the difficult exams that gave access to the institutes of higher learning. Br Charles' family wanted him to go to St Cyr where officers for the French army were trained.



School in Paris did not go well. He often writes to Gabriel whom he would meet during his holidays. One can sense a kind of anxiety in his desire to possess him, be with him all the time. Later in life he will write to him:

It will be so good to meet up, to see Nancy again and my little room where we spent such happy days together. Do you remember how often I forced you to stay in spite of your wishes, locking all the doors. Wasn't I right in doing that? It wouldn't be granted to us to always be together. We had to take advantage of the situation while it was still within our power.

Do you remember the Easter holidays during which I lived in the little house. I would spend my whole morning in bed, smoking my hookah pipe. You would come early morning and sit in the

big sofa or else you would walk around inside my room and we would talk. You would read out loud while I had my morning wash. We would stay together until lunch and usually even longer than that. Because I often kept you until 9pm. At that time grandfather was still well. If you ate supper at our place, even though it made him tired, it would bring him as much pleasure as me. He was happy when I forced you to stay at our place. He loved to hear our discussions. He took special delight in our evening readings. 13 April 1878

He only made his first communion at 14 years old because of the family's moving around. Marie, who will be present, will give him a book that will later be important for him. But for the present he very quickly he loses his faith. It's mostly due to what he reads.

By the time I was 15 or 16 I had no trace of faith left in me. The books I used to devour had done this to me. I didn't subscribe to any specific philosophy as none of them seemed solidly proved enough to me. I doubted everything, especially the catholic faith, since there were several of its dogmas that I found insulting to reason.

You have to bear in mind the environment in which he grew up. It seemed like an age of unlimited scientific and economic progress. He was 20 years old when the Eiffel Tower was built in Paris to commemorate the centennial since the revolution. The telephone had just been invented, electric light bulbs, radios. Marie Curie was discovering radioactivity. Rationalism was triumphant. Many people were sceptical about religion. During his childhood he was awakened to faith by a "saintly mother" but afterwards he remained alone and his thirst for truth and knowledge only encountered scientific, "lay" knowledge. In spite of studying in a school run by Jesuits, he will say that he was too young when he was prepared for college. He will regret that he wasn't given a better grounding in philosophy.

At 17 he was expelled (during his second year) 3 months before sitting the exam for St Cyr.



He will recall that "*Laziness wasn't the only reason*".

He remembers it as being one of the worst times of his life.

I think that I have never been in such a terrible state, writing to my grandfather almost every other day, letters that were sometimes up to 40 pages long, asking him to take me back home in Nancy.

St Cyr Oct 1876-78 18-20 years old

Back in Nancy his grandfather had to pay a private tutor to prepare him for his exam. Having had what he wanted he set himself to work and did very well. He was an extremely bright boy and was accepted by Saint Cyr, even though they had trouble finding a uniform that could fit Fatty de Foucauld. He was now signed up for 5 years of military service.

He wrote to his cousin, « *At St Cyr you had more companions than you wanted* » He tended to lead a solitary life, spending most of his time reading his beloved classical authors.

He didn't do well at St Cyr. He was often reprimanded for laziness, unkempt hair, dirty



trousers ,a bed that's not properly made.

He was 20 years old when his grandfather died during his second year at St Cyr. He will write:

At Nancy an immense sorrow befell me. I lost my grandfather. I admired his high intelligence, and his inexhaustible affection had enfolded my youth and childhood in an atmosphere of love. I can still feel the warmth of it and it always moves me. His death hurt me terribly, and fourteen years later, (it was 3 February 1878 that he died) the pain is still sharp.

It's as if a mourning process he hadn't been able to express as a child now burst forth.

One month later he writes to Gabriel:

You're lucky about one thing: it's that when you're tired of having fun you can return to your family and you will be able to live as before a happy and quiet life with your family and your books. That's not my case. I've lost both my family, my home and the quiet carefree life I cherished. And I will never find any of that again for as long as I live. Never again will I be happy and peaceful as I was in Nancy in the good old days where we spent so much time together. I have only one consolation: it's that right from that time I appreciated my happiness and I took advantage of it. Try to do the same.

It's very striking to compare his dismal outlook on life as a young man with what he will write to Gabriel 24 years later from Beni Abbas:

Dear friend, if ever you were to come and visit me, you know how happy I would be to embrace you and share my room with you. We would serve you the best barley loaves and the finest dates. We would talk about the past, about the present which is even better and the future which will be even more wonderful...I am happy, very happy, extremely happy, even though I haven't sought after happiness in any way, for many years.

He finishes St Cyr 333 out of 386...

In Sept 1879, when he is 21 years old, he comes into his inheritance. Until then the love of his grandfather had kept him in check. But from age 20-28 he enters a wild period.

After St Cyr he will go to Saumur, the Cavalry Academy. There again he is often in punishment, but this time the cause is insubordination. His room is reputed for lavish dinners and wild card games. He and his roommate Mores are often in detention

Once he underwent 15 days of arrest because he left the army barracks without permission. He had a further 21 days of arrest for escaping during his time of arrest. He snuck out in a disguise but was later picked up in town by some soldiers.

He managed to scrape through his studies but was graded n° 87 out of 87 students.

A notice was written on his report card: « Has had a good upbringing and has good manners. But is light headed and only thinks of amusement. Deprived of holidays due to conduct and frequent punishments.

It's only against this background of boredom, emptiness and sadness that troubled his youth that you can fully appreciate what faith brought him.

After his conversion he will write in a meditation:

I did evil but neither approved of it nor loved it... You made me feel a deep sadness, a painful emptiness... "Those horseback accidents I miraculously survived! The duels you prevented from happening!

While still a young officer he wrote to Gabriel:

My letters are all like complaints: You must be bored with them: not that I write you that often because I'm lagging behind in my correspondence with you. I'm like those who only pray when they're really sick: I only write to you when I'm very sad.

Now is a very bad time, for me anyways.

Why are those years when he was a "bad boy" so important? We too experience moments like that. Often we don't want to think about them again. But after his conversion, Br. Charles will re-read his experience. He doesn't just remember his "wild years » in order to ask for forgiveness but to give him thanks. He does a kind of double memory. Why? He had turned his back on God but realizes that God had never ceased to love him and had never abandoned him.



I was going further and further from you, my Lord and my Life. And so my life was turning into death. And in this state of death, you still watched over me. You made me feel a painful emptiness, a sadness the like of which I've never felt before or since. It came over me every night when I went home to my lodgings. What we called parties left me silent and heavy-hearted. You gave me the vague restlessness of a troubled conscience, for though my conscience was asleep it was not altogether dead. I have never felt as sad or restless as I did then. It must have been your gift, my God. I was so far from suspecting it. How good you are! How you kept me safe! How you sheltered me under your wings when I didn't even believe you existed.

He discovers that even if he himself is in sin, God is love and had never ceased loving him. His seeming absence is in fact full of his presence. We are wrong if we think that we can deserve

God's love. It is free and unconditional. That's what Jesus-Caritas means. And that is the image of God to which we must give witness. It's what Brother Charles wanted to testify to before his brothers and sisters of Islam. His emblem was a cross and heart because it was in the cross that God's gracious love was fully revealed.

Life as a junior officer

Once he had finished his training Charles was sent to a regiment in Pont a Mousson to guard the German border. There he got involved with a dancing girl that some writers have referred to as Mimi though no one in fact knows what her name really was. After several months there his regiment was sent to Algeria, to a town called Bone where St Augustine, many centuries earlier, had lived. The French colonization of Algeria was in full expansion.

Charles brought his girlfriend along and tried to pass her off as his wife. The officers' wives were indignant. His superiors demanded that he send her back to France. Faced with his refusal they told him to choose between the girl and his career. He chose the girl. It's not so much that he loved her but he couldn't stand being told what to do.

Having left active duty he went back to France to a grand hotel in Evian. He had only been there a short period when he received news that his regiment was engaged in combat. He immediately left her, begging to be taken back for active duty. He wrote to Gabriel that an expedition of this type was *too rare a pleasure to let it pass by*.

Strangely enough, this is the turning point on a journey of conversion where God didn't do any miracles but used a lot of people, both Christian and non Christian.

Perhaps the first factor in his return to God will be the land of Algeria itself. It's in this land that he will first experience God. It's interesting to compare his letters to Gabriel before and after he sets foot in Algeria. He is sent there at a time when he is bored. (An important theme for young people today).

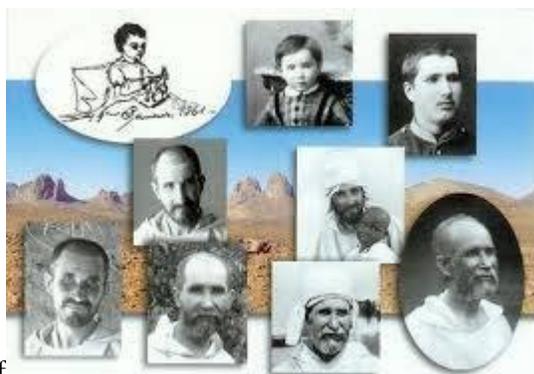
Dear old Tourdes, I hope you don't accuse me of having forgotten you. Why should I write to you when I have nothing to say? My life is spent in the most boring way possible. I'm always riding a horse, sometimes in a car but never walk – I'm hardly ever in my room – except for when I'm under house arrest – my body is tired. My soul is crushed – we never open a book. That's our life and those are its consequences.

A few months later he will write to him from Algeria:

My dear Gabriel,

I am now abroad, having left without saying goodbye. And so I'm in a rush to write you and tell you of my whereabouts. I arrived a few days ago in Bone where my regiment is going to spend the year. It's a beautiful town, the nicest in Algeria after Algiers. At least that's what all those who know this country say. The port is spectacular; the city is built on a magnificent location between the sea and some very high mountains that rise sharply less than a kilometre from the port. They are rocky mountains full of deep ravines. There are no forests but you can see enormous aloes plants and little palm trees. It's full of hyenas and jackals that only come out at night. Along the seaside there's beautiful greenery: palm trees, laurel bushes, orange trees. Add to that Arabs who go around in their white burnous or dressed in bright colours : along with flocks of camels, little donkeys and goats that all look so stunning. You can go on such beautiful walks.

If you want to go on a journey, come here. If you don't want to go on one then change your mind! It's necessary both for your health and your enjoyment. I'm waiting for you. All yours, Charles



You can feel that something has come to life inside of him.

The desert will also make a deep impression on him. He loved to wander under the night sky, alone. The desert reflects his solitary temperament. *“You feel invaded by the truth”*

After his return from Evian he will be sent to a new regiment to fight a rebel tribe under the leadership of Bou Amama, Those who knew him earlier said that he returned a changed man. He had learned to think of others and looked after his men. He will always have a liking for difficult things. His family logo was “Never go back”. When he decides on something nothing will stop him.

But once the action was over, he didn't want to return to the boredom of life in the barracks and so he resigned from the army once again. He wrote to Gabriel, *“Why bother hanging around a few more years in the army leading an aimless life that doesn't interest me; I prefer to take advantage of my youth to go travel. At least that way I'll learn something and I won't be wasting my time.*

When his family learned that he had again quit the army, they got together and imposed a judicial council on him. His inheritance was dwindling at such a pace that they decide to have him declared incapable of managing his estate. Access to his fortune would now be mediated by a cousin. He was deeply hurt and broke off relations with his aunt.

But even in spite of his financial restraints he remained in Algiers to prepare his expedition. At first he thought of trekking across the Sahara, but he finally decided on an exploration of Morocco. No one has yet mapped the interior of Morocco. It was a dangerous country with the different tribes and Sultans fighting each other. The interior of the country was more or less in a state of anarchy. But all would unite to fight Europeans because no one wanted the French to invade as they had in Algeria. Europeans could visit the coastal cities but not the interior. The idea of being the first one to do something really attracted him.

He spent 15 months preparing for his trip. He drew up a very tight schedule to learn Arab and geography. He wrote to Gabriel from Algiers:

I begin work at 7 am and finish at midnight. I have two half hour breaks for eating – all the rest of the time is divided up into study : Arabic, history, geography etc.

He cannot explore the country as a European nor can he pass himself off for an Arab since he doesn't speak the language well enough and so he decides to dress up as a Jew. He says that he's from Eastern Europe and is looking for the place where his ancestors used to live. He will hire Mardochee, a Moroccan Jew to be his guide and they will travel together for a year.



Apart from the scientific value of his journey, which will gain him the gold medal from the French Geography Society, there is an *inner journey*.

His encounter with Islam will leave a lasting mark on him.

1. *Islam made a very deep impression on me. The sight of such faith, of people living continually in the presence of God, made me glimpse something greater and truer than worldly pursuits. I set about studying Islam, and then the Bible.*

The encounter with God who is greater (Allah Akbar) will in many ways prepare the shock of Nazareth where God made himself little.

2. With Mardoche they will benefit from the hospitality offered to all in the name of God in zaouias (type of Muslim monastery). Welcoming strangers is a meeting point for the 3 great monotheistic religions. All acknowledge that in welcoming the three strangers at the Oak of Mamre, Abraham welcomed God himself. This hospitality will go very far because twice he will be recognized as a European and his life will be in danger. But both times someone will risk their life to save him. And he feels that those who act this way do so on account of their faith. A guest is sacred, is a manifestation of God.
3. Another aspect of his journey is important is the experience of poverty and of contempt. What he saw and experienced in Morocco will always be the measure of what constitutes poverty for him. It's not just a question of material poverty due to hunger and lack of lodging but also the contempt he will experience as a Jew.

On his return from Morocco, Charles settled in Paris and spent all his time writing up his findings in a book that will be published two years later: "A Reconnaissance of Morocco". He lives close to his Aunt Ines and her two daughters. Marie, now Marie de Bondy is a young mother with 4 little children. They receive him like the prodigal son, without a word of reproof. He can guess that there is some connection between their attitude and their faith. He experiences a strange kind of inner longing in their presence. Their faith questions him. He knew them to be a strong believer but they never preach at him. That will shape his attitude to evangelisation later on. He will want to cry the Gospel with his life.

For the time being, he will set about reading all kinds of philosophical works but they leave him cold. He opens the book Marie had given him for his first communion and feels all its warmth, but still he cannot believe himself to believe. And in this state, it's only when he sits alone in Churches that he feels at ease. He will later recall:

Your first grace, the one I see as the dawn of my conversion, was to have given me a hunger. It was then I came back to you, timidly groping my way; and repeating this strange prayer: "If you exist, then let me know you."

He prayed before ever he believed, instinctively sensing that faith is a gift of God. In meditations he wrote later on, he will recognize himself in the prodigal son who's return home is decided by hunger.

When I was young I went far from you, far from your house...to a far away land...oh what a painful distance between that land and You! I remained there a long time, 13 years, wasting my youth in sin and folly. Your first grace was to make me experience famine, both a material and a spiritual hunger.

It's important because Br. Charles will search for God a lot in books. But that's not where he finds him. It's as a poor person that he will meet him. The difference between him and the prodigal son is that whereas the father of the latter remained at home and waited for him, God set off in search of him in his far away country. He will never say, "I converted" but, "God converted me."

His hunger is met by Marie de Bondy's silent, discrete witness, that preached like the rose that has no other words than the sweet perfume of its life. One day he will say to her, "*You are so lucky to believe! I am searching for the light and I cannot find it*". She will reply to him, "*Do you think that searching all alone is the right way to go about things?*"



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And he will go to Fr. Huvelin. He was a priest who had done a lot of studies but had always chosen to be a humble curate in the parish of Saint Augustine. He remained there for 35 years. But even with his lowly status, he was a well known figure in the Church in Paris. Many people went to him for confession. He had a great gift of guessing what was going on inside people. He was also very popular as a preacher and had quite a following of young women who used to copy down his talks. You can find books of his sermons.

His definition of Nazareth : *Nazareth is a house that you build in your heart, or rather that you allow to be built by the hands of Jesus, Child who is meek and humble of heart.*

He had certainly already met Charles de Foucauld. He used to sometimes come to Ines Moitessier's salons on Sunday afternoon. He was Marie de Bondy's spiritual director. She had met him by chance, having gone into his confessional. He had also celebrated Charles' sister's wedding. Charles had been one of the witnesses.

When he had wanted to learn Arabic, Charles had sought a good teacher. And so now that he wanted to have religion lessons he planned to take part in a series of lectures Fr. Huvelin was to give. But ill health caused him to cancel. And so one morning, Br Charles came to ask him for private lessons. The confessional was the place where you could always find him. But to Br Charles' amazement, instead of answering his request, Fr. Huvelin simply invited him to confess. He seemed to intuitively know that this young man's intellectual search need to be cut short and he had to be brought to another level.

"Lord, when you made me enter into his confessional on one of the last days of October 1886, you gave me everything. If there is joy in heaven when a sinner repents, then there must have been joy when I entered that confessional. I asked for religious instruction. He told me to



kneel down and make my confession.

God isn't an idea that you can master with your intelligence...God can't be proven but only met. And you have to come to him with a certain hunger. Immediately after confession Br Charles was sent to receive communion. The experience was so overwhelming that he would shed tears whenever he remembered it. His logo *Jesus Caritas* is the expression of this foundational experience where his love for the Eucharist is rooted. That "God is love" isn't something that he learned in a book but in his flesh.



At the beginning of his journey in the footsteps of Jesus there is an immense gift. He was *mercied*.

The fruit of this conversion will be an unshakeable confidence in the goodness of God. Not only does Jesus choose the least to save them but he makes them in to his special friends. It will give him an immense confidence which he will be able to share with others. We have his letter to Louis Massignon who was struggling with homosexuality:

Peace and trust. Hope. Don't dwell on yourself. Our moral wretchedness is a muddy swamp that should often inspire us to humble ourselves, but we shouldn't always have our eyes on it. We should also turn our eyes to the Beloved, and keep them much more often on him, on his beauty, and his infinite love with which he graciously loves us. When you love you forget yourself and think of the one you love. If we're constantly thinking of how unworthy of being loved we are, that's not love.

For Br Charles, faith will not be an intellectual conviction but a dynamic that sets him in motion and makes him walk with confidence in the footsteps of his Beloved Brother and Lord.