

"Every Christian is an apostle"

In his 18 October general audience, Pope Francis continued his catechetical cycle on apostolic zeal, speaking about Saint Charles de Foucauld.

10/18/2023

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Let us continue in our encounter with some Christian witnesses rich in zeal for proclaiming the Gospel.

Apostolic zeal, the zeal for proclamation: and we are looking at some Christians who have been an example of this apostolic zeal. Today I would like to talk to you about a man who made Jesus and his poorest brothers the passion of his life. I refer to Saint Charles de Foucauld, who “drawing upon his intense experience of God, made a journey of transformation towards feeling a brother to all” (Encyclical Letter *Fratelli tutti*, 286).

And what is the “secret” of Charles de Foucauld, of his life? After living a youth far from God, without believing in anything other than the disordered pursuit of pleasure, he confides this to a non-believing friend, to whom, after having converted by accepting the grace of God's forgiveness in Confession, he reveals the reason for his life. He writes: “I have lost my heart to Jesus of Nazareth.”^[1] Brother Charles thus

reminds us that the first step in evangelizing is to have Jesus inside one's heart; it is to "fall head over heels" for him. If this does not happen, we can hardly show it with our lives. Instead, we risk talking about ourselves, the group to which we belong, a morality or, even worse, a set of rules, but not about Jesus, his love, his mercy. I see this in some new movements that are emerging: they talk about their vision of humanity, they talk about their spirituality and they feel theirs is a new path... But why do you not talk about Jesus? They talk about many things, about organization, about spiritual journeys, but they do not know how to talk about Jesus. I think that today it would be good for each one of us to ask him or herself: "Do I have Jesus at the centre of my heart? Have I 'lost my head' a bit for Jesus?"

Charles had, to the extent that he goes from *attraction to Jesus* to

imitation of Jesus. Advised by his confessor, he goes to the Holy Land to visit the places where the Lord lived and to walk where the Master walked. In particular, it is in Nazareth that he realises he must be formed in the school of Christ. He experiences an intense relationship with the Lord, spends long hours reading the Gospels, and feels like his little brother. And as he gets to know Jesus, the desire to make Jesus known arises in him; it always happens like this. When one of us gets to know Jesus better, the desire to make him known, to share this treasure, arises. In commenting on the account of Our Lady's visit to Saint Elizabeth, he makes him say, to Our Lady, to him: "I have given myself to the world... take me to the world". Yes, but how is this done? Like Mary in the mystery of the Visitation: "in silence, by example, by life."^[2] By life, because "our whole existence," writes Brother Charles,

“must proclaim the Gospel.”^[3] And very often our existence proclaims worldliness, it proclaims many stupid things, strange things, and he says: “No, all our existence must proclaim the Gospel.”

He then decides to settle in distant regions to cry out the Gospel in the silence, living in the spirit of Nazareth, in poverty and concealment. He does to the Sahara Desert, among non-Christians, and he goes there as a friend and a brother, bearing the meekness of Jesus the Eucharist. Charles lets Jesus act silently, convinced that the “Eucharistic life” evangelizes. Indeed, he believes that Christ is the first evangelizer. And so he remains in prayer at Jesus’ feet, before the Tabernacle, for a dozen hours a day, sure that the evangelizing force resides there and feeling that it is Jesus who will bring him close to so many distant brothers. And do we, I

ask myself, believe in the power of the Eucharist? Does our going out to others, our service, find its beginning and its fulfilment there, in adoration? I am convinced that we have lost the sense of adoration: we must regain it, starting with us consecrated persons, bishops, priests, nuns and all consecrated persons. “Waste” time before the Tabernacle, regain the sense of adoration.

Charles de Foucauld wrote: “Every Christian is an apostle,”^[4] and reminds a lay friend that “there need to be laypeople close to priests, to see what the priest does not see, who evangelize with a proximity of charity, with goodness for everyone, with affection always ready to be given.”^[5] The saintly laypeople, not climbers, but those laypeople, that layman, that laywoman, who love Jesus, make the priest understand that he is not a functionary, he is a mediator, a priest. How we priests

need to have beside us those laypeople who truly believe, and who teach us the way by their witness.

Charles de Foucauld, with this lay experience, foreshadows the times of Vatican Council II; he intuits the importance of the laity and understands that the proclamation of the Gospel is up to the entire people of God. But how can we increase this participation? The way Charles de Foucauld did: by kneeling and welcoming the action of the Spirit, who always inspires new ways to engage, meet, listen and dialogue, always in collaboration and trust, always in communion with the Church and pastors.

Saint Charles de Foucauld, a figure who is a prophecy for our time, bore witness to the beauty of communicating the Gospel through *the apostolate of meekness*: considering himself a “universal

brother” and welcoming everyone, he shows us the evangelizing force of meekness, of tenderness. Let us not forget that God’s style is summarized in three words: proximity, compassion and tenderness. God is always near, he is always compassionate, he is always tender. And Christian witness must take this road: of proximity, compassion and tenderness. And this is how he was, meek and tender. He wanted everyone he met to see, through his goodness, the goodness of Jesus.

Indeed, he used to say that he was a “servant to someone much better than me.”^[6] Living Jesus’ goodness led him to forge fraternal friendships with the bonds of friendship with the poor, with the Tuareg, with those furthest from his mentality.

Gradually these bonds generated fraternity, inclusion, appreciation of the other’s culture. Goodness is simple and asks us to be simple people, who are not afraid to offer a

smile. And with his smile, with his simplicity, Brother Charles bore witness to the Gospel. Never by proselytism, never: by witness. One does not evangelize by proselytism, but by witness, by attraction.

So finally, let us ask ourselves whether we bring Christian joy, Christian meekness, Christian tenderness, Christian compassion, Christian proximity. Thank you.

^[1] *Lettres à un ami de lycée. Correspondance avec Gabriel Tourdes (1874-1915)*, Paris 2010, 161.

^[2] *Crier l'Evangile*, Montrouge 2004, 49.

^[3] M/314 in C. de Foucauld, *La bonté de Dieu. Méditations sur les Saints Evangiles (1)*, Montrouge 2002, 285.

^[4] *Letter to Joseph Hours*, in *Correspondances lyonnaises (1904-1916)*, Paris 2005, 92.

^[5] Ivi, 90.

^[6] *Carnets de Tamanrasset (1905-1916)*, Paris 1986, 188.
