

# Retreat

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*Summary: Recounts the life and vocation of Charles de Foucauld who inspired the foundation of the Little Brothers and Little Sisters of Jesus. She is especially attracted to their living with the poor in poverty and their devotion to manual labor. (DDLW #755).*

Although we have had retreats at the Peter Maurin Farm, it is hard for those in charge of them to make them. So this year, Beth Rogers, Charles Butterworth, and I set out on Friday, June 26, to make an eighth day retreat given by Father Brennan who teaches Scripture at St. Bernard's Seminary, Rochester, New York and Fr. Jaques Leclerc, chaplain of Maisonneuve Hospital in Montreal. The retreat was given at St. Jean Marie Vianney Seminary at Ville des Prairies, north of Montreal in a barracks-like E-shaped building set almost on the banks of the river at the end of the long island in the St. Lawrence which is Montreal.

It was blisteringly hot weather and continued so for some days after our arrival but then the air freshened and we finished the week pleasantly. What a wonderful way to spend a vacation.

About 28 attended the first four days of the retreat, from Friday night until Tuesday night, and then until Saturday the Jesus Caritas fraternity continued it.

The retreat was sponsored by the Secular Fraternity of Charles of Jesus (Charles de Foucauld) and there were very many participants from the United States, one woman coming all the way from Portland, Oregon, and a couple from Chicago, ten from New York City, four from Boston, one from Maine, one from Philadelphia. Ottawa and Montreal accounted for the rest.

The day started with the Angelus, Prime and meditation, reading at breakfast, a morning conference and Holy Mass, followed by lunch, adoration, rosary, conference and supper. There were two hours of discussion in three groups in the evening, and after compline, bed. The silence kept was absolute except for the limited amount of talking during the discussion, which was kept to such subjects as prayer, adoration, poverty, manual labor etc. as applied to our own lives in the world.

It was the longest retreat that I ever made. The retreats that we had at Pittsburgh and at Maryfarm began on Sunday night and continued until Friday night and they were intensive indeed.

There were many points of similarity in the two retreats, one of them the nocturnal adoration on Thursday night, and the emphasis on silence and the work of the Holy Spirit in the retreat. There was the same teaching on prayer that Fr. Louis Farina always gave us, that hour in

the desert which each of us ought to spend each day, worshipping the Father in spirit and truth, with no time spent in reading, saying ones beads, making the stations and so on. It is an hour in the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, adoring in naked faith. Some days there were two hours of adoration, in addition to the other exercises.

Fr. Lesseur of Saint Suplice had flown over from Paris to give a retreat at the seminary, and he opened our retreat with a long conference, starting at nine p.m. and lasting until nearly eleven. He spoke of the living presence of Jesus in the Eucharist and in the Gospel, and the discipline of silence, exterior and interior, and the presence of Jesus in our fellow men, and in the poor. Our love for Jesus must be outwardly shown, we must make charity clearly visible, expressed in everything we say or do.

Fr. Brennan went on the next day to talk of the Imitation of Jesus in His hidden life at Nazareth, in the desert and in the public ministry. Everything can be found in the hidden life at Nazareth, he said. A year or two ago when Bob Lax of **Jubilee** spoke at the Friday night meeting of **The Catholic Worker**, he spoke of the Little Brothers of Jesus of Charles de Foucauld, and how their whole life is based on that hidden life of Nazareth in poverty, hard work, and living with the poor, with no outward works, like institutions, but in silence and friendship.

There is not space here to give the retreat but we hope there are going to be monthly meetings in the Fall in Brooklyn for those interested in the lay Fraternity of Brother Charles of Jesus which can be made up of married and single, men and women, on some day when it is convenient for all, including a priest, to be present.

## Charles de Foucauld

I first heard of Charles de Foucauld from Peter Maurin in the early thirties, when the work of **The Catholic Worker** was beginning. The biography by Rene Bazin appeared in 1920 and Peter had read it and spoke often of men and women living in the world a consecrated life of manual labor, poverty and adoration. Actually he was speaking of secular institutes though they were not known as such at that time. He himself spent an hour a day in adoration, and I have told in my book **The Long Loneliness**, how when I first met him and he proposed **The Catholic Worker** movement, I went to meet him at a parish church and found him absorbed before the Holy Eucharist, so absorbed that I too sat in the church waiting for him for almost an hour. I am sure that what fascinated Peter was the emphasis on work, on poverty and the poor. Charles de Foucauld, Peter pointed out, was a Count, one of the old French nobility, and he had never practiced his faith, had grown up in habits of dissipation so strong that his family had to appoint a guardian for his money so that he could not spend without its being authorized by his trustees. He had been a military man and like Kropotkin, also a noble, also a military man, had gone in for geographical exploration which influenced him profoundly. Brother Charles, as he came to be known, was deeply affected by seeing the religious practice of the Moslems who worshipped so many times daily.

The conversion was so complete that from then on nothing seemed too difficult for him. He entered the Trappist Monastery at Notre Dame de Neiges, in Peter Maurin's own country,

Languedoc, with the understanding that he was to be transferred to La Trappe in Akbes, Syria, where the poverty was more extreme. "The house is made up of a score of religious and about fifteen orphans from six to twelve years of age, without speaking of birds of passage," Brother Charles wrote.

"One night," Father Voillaume wrote in his introduction to his own book of spiritual conferences *Seeds of the Desert*, "he was sent by his Father Abbot to sit up with a person who had just died in the family of an Arab working man living in the neighboring village. This contact with the world of the very poor was a profoundly moving experience for him." Although he was living in the poorest of Trappist houses, Brother Charles wrote, "Oh, the difference between those buildings of ours and the poor workingman's house. I am not yet satisfied. I long for Nazareth."

His vocation was recognized as an extraordinary one by his superiors, and finally he was permitted to go to Nazareth literally, to live in a little lean-to shack built against the wall of a Franciscan convent. He had been seven years with the Trappists, now he lived as a servant and handyman for the sisters for two years. From then on he dreamed of the formation of he called Fraternities of Little Brothers. They were "to imitate Jesus of Nazareth in the poverty, the daily toil and the social status of the poor amongst mankind . . . the second factor if his ideal was an intimate familiar friendship with our Lord, expressing itself more especially in the cult of His words in the Gospel and His presence in the Blessed Sacrament . . . and He wished to bring people the Gospel, and very particularly the poorest and the most forsaken."

Of course he was drawn back to Morocco, but not being able to enter, he settled first in Beni Abbes in Algeria, near the border. Here he lived in a mud hut, received all who came, ministered to the soldiers of a nearby army post as well as to the desert Moslems, even ransoming by buying them and setting them free. Later he moved still farther south to the Tuareg country, a thousand miles from Algiers at Tamanrasset, where the nomads roam far and wide through the surrounding mountains with their hide tents and camels and goat herds . . . "I doubt whether it is possible to realize how completely Father de Foucauld gave himself up to these people, allowing himself literally to be eaten up by them . . . He practiced hospitality, rendering service and caring for the sick, seeking to penetrate the secrets of their language, writing a Tamashek grammar and dictionary, collecting tribal proverbs and poems, studying their traditions and customs. His vocation was one"of being present amongst people, with a presence willed and intended as a witness of the love of Christ . . . to preach by silence, by practicing the evangelical virtues." Love with him meant "his daily life, his whole way of living, down to his dwelling itself, were to help make him one of them."

Brother Charles never succeeded in starting his little brothers. The very word "little" was always to be a reminder of the desire for the suffering, the contempt even, the lack of recognition which the poor suffer from. This last month one of our readers wrote to reproach me for the expression, "the little Jew" which he said he read in Jim Milord's article. To him, sensitive to the affronts people of the Lord's race have had to suffer, "little Jew" carried with it the implication of contempt, scorn.

Brother Charles did not succeed in winning vocations, and in 1916 he was shot and killed by one of the very Touaregs whom he so much loved. It was not until 1932 that Fr. Rene Voillaume, with a few other newly ordained priests in Paris, undertook to start fraternities of

little brothers such as Brother Charles of Jesus desired, a religious congregation recognized by the Church since 1936. Now he is Prior General of the congregation, ecclesiastical superior of the Little Sisters of Jesus founded in 1939, and more recently of the two secular institutes and a lay association which has sprung up around the two congregations are under his general direction.

One of the reasons I am so strongly attracted to the spirit of this “family” is of course its emphasis on poverty as a means, poverty as an expression of love, poverty because Jesus lived it. And then too the emphasis on humble manual labor is for all. In one of my books, **On Pilgrimage**, published 12 years ago, I quoted Charles de Foucauld, “Manual Labor is necessarily put into second place, to make room for studies at present because you and I are in the period of infancy; we are not yet old enough to work with St. Joseph, we are still with Jesus the little child at the Virgin’s knee, learning to read. But later on, humble, vile, despised manual labor will again take its great place, and then Holy Communion, the lives of the saints, the humble work of our hands, humiliation and suffering!”

I quote this again to show that this is no new enthusiasm, this appreciation of Brother Charles of Jesus and the great work he inspired. Since quoting these lines in 1948, Fr. Voillaume has spoken at the Catholic Worker, we have read his conferences, we have had many meetings with others who shared our enthusiasm, and who had first hand living experience with the Little Sisters and the Little Brothers. Carol Jackson, one of the founders of Integrity, which unfortunately is no longer being published, knew the Little Sisters intimately in France, and Bob Lax the Little Brothers. Nina Polcyn of St. Benet’s library in Chicago, introduced me to the Little Sisters in Boston and received hospitality from them; I made an hour of adoration before the altar in the tiny chapel of the Little Sisters in Montreal where they have their house above Patricia House on Murray Street, certainly a most miserable slum. I brought Mrs. Nicholas Longworth to visit them in Washington, D.C., where they have a little house near the Catholic University, and where they earn their living by cleaning office buildings at the University. Others of our group have also had contact with them, and we feel that this is one of those movements in the Church, inspired by the Holy Spirit, to inspire and encourage us all, especially all those little ones throughout the country, who suffer from a sense of frustration and futility, surrounded by children and family, suffering from poverty, unemployment, injustice. If they are once taken by these basic ideas, these basic truths, they will have the energy, the light and the joy to work for peace and justice, as Ammon does for instance, on the streets, on picket lines and in prisons – a strong voice calling in the wilderness. He spent his seven years in the wilderness, in the desert, in poverty and manual labor and worked alone on the streets of those western cities.

How far one’s vocation will take one, is always a mystery, and where one’s vocation will take one. But I believe it to be true always that the foundations are always in poverty, manual labor, and in seeming failure. It is the pattern of the Cross, and in the Cross is joy of spirit.