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## Charles de Foucauld's gift

This spring, the city of Rome will play host to two events which at first sight may seem unrelated, and yet are deeply intertwined. On 15<sup>th</sup> May, Pope Francis will canonise Blessed Charles de Foucauld, the onetime soldier / adventurer turned hermit, along with five others. The following month - June 22<sup>nd</sup>-26<sup>th</sup> - the Pope will preside over the World Meeting of Families (WMF 2022), an international biennial gathering and celebration of family life. What might a celibate, who left family life to live alone in the desert, have in common with an event which promotes the very vocation which he eschewed? In a word: Nazareth.

One of the preparatory teaching reflections (catecheses) for WMF 2022 is entitled 'Nazareth: making love ordinary', and its reflections invite families to consider the example of the Holy Family during Jesus' hidden years. Its teaching on Nazareth situates the incarnation within a humble human family in a small village, and affirms that families today can fulfil a particular vocation: to render love normal in the daily routines of family life<sup>1</sup>.

WMF 2022's focus on Nazareth, on Jesus' hidden life, and his choice of humility and love in the daily life of an obscure village, immediately recall the life of Blessed Charles to those of us who know his story and revere his example. Charles was born in Strasbourg, France, in 1858. Having attended the military academy at St Cyr, he soon applied his training during an epic geographical expedition to map the inaccessible desert regions of southern Morocco, winning a gold medal from the Société de Géographie de Paris. On his return to France, having been deeply marked by his encounter with Islam in Morocco and "these souls living continuously in the presence of God,"<sup>2</sup> he rediscovered his long-abandoned childhood Catholic faith. In doing so he simultaneously discovered the beginnings of his true vocation: "as soon as I believed there was a God, I understood that I could do nothing else but live only for him"<sup>3</sup>. Desiring to follow Jesus as closely as possible, and with the passion and single-mindedness which were his hallmarks, he elected to travel to the Holy Land, choosing to live in Nazareth in complete poverty as a gardener and handyman at the Poor Clare convent there. Realising subsequently that a vocation to live the spirituality of Nazareth need not be lived literally in that town, he sought ordination as a priest and lived among the Touareg nomads, first in Beni-Abès and then in Tamanrasset in the Algerian Sahara, eventually being assassinated by a raiding party in 1916.

Charles' life and writings, inspired by the spirituality of Nazareth, can provide a fruitful source of inspiration for families in this year of his canonisation.

A first insight is the sanctification of ordinary life. For Charles, it was significant that the large majority of Jesus' life was spent hidden from public view, immersed in the simple routines of daily living in the family and at work. Charles highlights the gospel phrase that Jesus went *down* to Nazareth after the Finding in the Temple, commenting that he did so, "to live the life of poor working people." We might draw here on a phrase from Johannes Baptist Metz who calls the experience of humdrum daily existence 'the poverty of ordinariness'<sup>4</sup>. The routines of life: working, commuting, cooking, shopping, sleeping, can be ways to true solidarity with Jesus and the Holy Family, and constitute a genuine poverty of spirit. Indeed, in Charles we see a progressive maturing away from a romanticised desire for poverty lived literally in the Lord's town, to a practical sharing of life with the very poorest through advocacy, neighbourliness and hospitality. Where families live a spirit of prayer and a desire to encounter Jesus everywhere, the routines and challenges of family life can be imbued with spiritual meaning and constitute an authentic *sequela Christi*.

A second inspiration from Charles can be his quiet and faithful Christian presence within a communities which did not share his faith, both in the Holy Land and North Africa. Unusually for late 19<sup>th</sup>-century Christianity, Charles never preached or tried to convert his neighbours, most of whom were Muslim. While believing Jesus to be saviour of all, he came to realise that living as a universal brother was his way to witness to the Gospel. Charles hoped that his own striving for holiness and his prayer for and support of his neighbours, complemented by the presence of the Eucharist in his simple home, would radiate outwards to the spiritual benefit of all. Evocatively, he compares this to the pregnant Mary bringing the hidden presence of Jesus to Elizabeth and John the Baptist, leaving blessings and joy in their wake. A century and more later, many families now live in a similar setting, perhaps being among the very few believers of Christian or any faith present in their street or apartment block. Indeed, a person may be the only believer in their own family. Charles' life exemplifies for modern Christians what theologian James Hunter calls a theology of 'faithful presence within'. Drawing on Israel's theology of exile, as articulated especially in Jeremiah, he suggests that Christians today should seek to avoid three common reactions vis-à-vis secular culture: 'defensive against', 'relevance to', or 'purity from' the prevailing culture. Like exiled Israel, contemporary Christians are rather called to live distinctively, discerning and critiquing their situation in the light of the Gospel yet praying for and wishing good on the culture and countries in which they live, bringing *shalom* to their communities by prayer, presence, hospitality and solidarity<sup>5</sup>.

In addition, those among our neighbours who are practising religious believers may very well be Muslim or members of other Christian denominations or other faiths, while others may have married into a believing family of another tradition. Charles' deep respect for Islam and his commitment to brotherhood with his Muslim neighbours can inspire families to find common cause and to seek spiritual solace in the secular space, knowing that they are part of what Henri Nouwen called the community of all those who pray. Practical interreligious dialogue can grow over the breakfast table, in the ante-natal class, or at the school gates, and lead to true and lasting friendship and community, becoming one of the signs of the times and contributing to the building of God's kingdom.

A final inspiration for families can come from Charles' extraordinary hospitality. He regularly welcomed 60 to 100 people per day at his simple house in Beni-Abès, modelled on a *zaouia*, the seat of a Muslim confraternity which serves as a place of prayer, teaching and hospitality<sup>6</sup>. He received as well as offered hospitality, as shown during a period of illness in Algeria when he deepened his friendships in shared suffering with the local people and received their care, seeing in this experience of limitation a way to live his poverty more deeply. In addition, Charles' hospitality and care knew no geographical bounds, as he was a faithful and enthusiastic letter-writer. He penned thousands of letters, often using the most basic of materials available in the desert to maintain correspondence with family and friends and share family news, especially on the occasion of birthdays or other celebrations. Charles' welcoming home and prodigious correspondence reveals his embrace of a vocation to hospitality and the maintenance of the bonds of family and neighbourly love which still resonate today.

Charles de Foucauld once wrote of his joy at being in Nazareth: "I am perhaps the only soul in Nazareth, at this moment, at your feet. What have I done to merit this grace?"<sup>7</sup> He carried his devotion to Nazareth, a place of closeness to the hidden and obscure Jesus, with him to the depths of the desert, flowering in contemplation, hospitality and universal brotherhood. May families sit at his feet, and those of Jesus, to learn how to live the grace of Nazareth in our own day.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.romefamily2022.com/en/catechesi-4/>.

<sup>2</sup> De Foucauld, C. (1938). Letters to Henry de Castries. Paris, Grasset, p. 86.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 96.

<sup>4</sup> Metz, J. B. (1998). Poverty of Spirit. Paulist Press, Mahwah (NJ).

<sup>5</sup> Hunter, J. (2010). To change the world: the irony, tragedy and possibility of Christianity today. Oxford Scholarship Online. DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199730803.001.0001

<sup>6</sup> <https://charlesdefoucauld.info/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Bio-3-Beni-Abbes-.pdf> , p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Retreat at Nazareth, Nov 1897. In De Foucauld, C. (1930). Meditations of a Hermit. London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, pp. 48-49.