

THE FOLLOWERS OF FOUCAULD

BY

L. C. SHEPPARD



It seems to be the lot of some of the servants of God that they begin to exert a powerful influence only after their death. One such case, of course, was Sœur Thérèse of Lisieux, unknown at death, of world-wide renown within twenty years afterwards (*before* her beatification). Such too seems to be the case with Fr Charles of Jesus—Charles de Foucauld, the missionary monk and hermit of the Sahara.

His way of life can have but a limited attraction though his teaching and methods have anything but a restricted application. It is perhaps the very relevance of his method of apostolate that is drawing men to study what he did, and in some cases to imitate him, with the necessary adaptations of course, in the task of proclaiming the Gospel by their life. *Crier l'Évangile par toute ma vie* was his watchword; if it were indeed done by all Christians how quickly would the world be conquered for Christ.

Père Voillaume, the prior of *Les Petits Frères de Jesus*, has written a short book¹ describing the mission and spirit of the modern followers of de Foucauld. At El-Abiodh-Sidi-Cheikh there is a flourishing community and in France there are two houses of women following a rule taking its inspiration from de Foucauld. The *Petits Frères* hope to found a house in a working class quarter of one of the big industrial towns of France this year.

Thirty years after his death then Fr Charles's projects are beginning to take shape. When the constitutions of the first fraternity at El-Abiodh (founded in 1933) were sent to Rome for examination one of the points about which revision was required was the name of the founder. The authorities would not agree that a man could found an institute after his death. If Fr Charles's name cannot figure as founder, he is surely the patriarch of these modern solitaries.

It is tempting to examine the three rules that he sketched at different periods each showing a further development of his method. But pride of place must be given to the point that was raised earlier on—the relevance of his form of apostolate to the present day.

Fr Charles in his evangelical simplicity would be the 'universal brother' and his disciples hope to follow in his footsteps and to introduce his method among the working-class population of France.

¹ Fr René Voillaume: *Les Fraternités du Père Foucauld: Mission et Esprit*. (Paris, Les Éditions du Cerf; Oxford, Blackfriars Publications; 8s.)

Whether it be in the almost totally pagan (certainly never Christian) industrial centres—the suburbs of Paris, for instance, the docks of Marseilles or Bordeaux (Père Loew's *En Mission Proletarienne*, or the Abbé Godin and the Abbé Daniel's book *La France Pays de Mission?* are both relevant here)—or in the much de-Christianized countryside, there is ample need for such work as Fr Charles did in the Hoggar. The *Petits Frères* intend this year to open a house in a working-class area. In this penetration they are not the pioneers, for it has been shown in practice already that it is not sufficient to plant a church and presbytery (or even a parish hall) in an un-Christian area; such a process does not effect the conversion of the district—it gathers merely a few scattered Christians who had become buried in the mass of unbelief. Good has been done in this way, of course, but it has not been the good that was intended. What is required is not contact but penetration, penetration that can be effected only through a common life with the people it is intended to influence. So Père Loew has proved in Marseilles, so have the factory priests proved in Paris. But the *Petits Frères* will go a step further. They will live among these abandoned populations—as Père de Foucauld lived among the Touareg—and they will work alongside them too at the factory bench, but their work with all its hardships (they eschew capital, so that in addition to the poverty of their profession, they will suffer the insecurity that is inseparable from the other and perhaps harder form of poverty) will be undertaken primarily to live. Their aim is the contemplative life and it is in this that they differ from the modern missionaries mentioned above. Consequently the work they undertake must be compatible with such a life and be at the same time a witness to poverty.

Père Voillaume describes an experiment in Algeria. Some of the brothers have joined in a cooperative undertaking with the natives who are too poor separately to undertake the cultivation of their land. Each associate furnishes his share of work in the cultivation of a piece of land which has been assigned to the association collectively by the council of the tribe. The crop of vegetables and cereals is distributed equally among the members of the cooperative. This essay has so far been fruitful, and it has the further advantage of being in accordance with local traditions.

Christian common life requires common prayer. The life of the *Petits Frères*, followers of Foucauld, could not but be centred on the mystery of the Eucharist, the sacrifice and sign of the mystical body. Theirs is a fraternal community ' . . . based on evangelical realism, witnessing to Christ and his message by giving a living demonstration of what a Christian community ought to be.' The exterior form of life can be adapted to meet the circumstances of place and people

where it is lived; the principles on which it is based remain of course constant. In such communities the divine Office must obviously have a place. Père Voillaume insists on its importance, not only as a method of sanctifying the working day but as the means by which the Fraternity can take its part in the great movement of intercession and redemption of Christ living in his Church.

Given the importance of the Office and because *une bonne partie des frères est incapable de comprendre le latin* the language problem has to be faced. Père Voillaume asserts that to maintain the Office in Latin and impose it on all would be to expose the undertaking to the certain peril of formalism; the Office would become a burden and no longer fulfil the function of forming to the contemplative life. Nor can those who do not know Latin be kept away from the community prayer. 'The best solution would appear to be the recitation of the Office for all in the vernacular.'²

The coordination of the elements of the life of the *Petits Frères*, its activities, its spirituality, the formal renunciation of active ministry and of any effort at direct apostolate, the whole spirit of the rule, all aim at the formation and development of a contemplative life; the contacts of the brothers' daily work are not excluded from this end, rather are they one of the special means employed. It is a contemplative life lived in an intense spirit of eucharistic immolation; and this life is to be offered in the first place for those whose cross of daily labour and care the brothers share.

It will be seen then what is the essential novelty of the *Petits Frères* and how they differ from the old established contemplative orders. In place of the absence of exterior activity, the separation from the world, we find a contemplative life lived in the hurly-burly of the daily tasks of ordinary folk. Their spirituality, their rule teaches the *Petits Frères* to treat as the means of union with God those very things that have in the past been so often regarded as obstacles. These fraternities are contemplative, not because they establish their members in an exterior state conducive to contemplation but because they have at their disposition the required means for the end in view: a eucharistic life, fraternal charity, immolation of self, work. So may be formed the contemplative life in the soul; it is a real and continuing education. Such is this school of sanctity. It has of course its own risks; they must be seen clearly and faced courageously. Any great undertaking has an element of risk; Chris-

² 'C'est vers un réalisation progressive en ce sens, et dans la mesure où le permettent les règles liturgiques actuelles, que s'orientent, dès maintenant, les efforts des Fraternités.' One would have liked to have been told more about this. All the community presumably takes part in the recitation. Are the priests obliged to any other Office as well? If they are not it is a departure of great moment.

tian perfection has its own. As Père Voillaume wisely remarks, it is only mediocrity that avoids all semblance of risk.

This book is invaluable for an authentic interpretation and a true understanding of the significance of Père de Foucauld's life. It shows the relevance of that life to modern conditions anywhere.

ST B E N E D I C T

'The special and chief task that seemed to have been given to him in the designs of God's providence was not so much to impose on the West the manner of life of the monks of the East, as to adapt that life and accommodate it to the genius, needs and conditions of Italy and the rest of Europe. Thus to the placid asceticism which flowered so well in the monasteries of the East, he added laborious and tireless activity which allows the monks 'to give to others the fruit of contemplation', and not only to produce crops from uncultivated land, but also to cultivate spiritual fruit through their exhausting apostolate. The community life of a Benedictine house tempered and softened the severities of the solitary life, not suitable for all and even dangerous at times for some; through prayer and work and application to sacred and profane sciences, a blessed peace knows not idleness nor sloth; activity and work, far from wearying the mind, distracting it and applying it to useless things, rather tranquillize it, strengthen it and lift it up to higher things. Indeed, an excessive rigour of discipline or severity of penance is not imposed, but before all else love of God and a fraternal charity that is universal and sincere. 'He so tempered the rule that the strong would desire to do more and the weak not be frightened by its severity; he tried to govern his disciples by love rather than dominate them by fear'.

—POPE PIUS XII

(from the *Encyclical of March, 1947*.)