

Can We Change?

The Sacred Heart calling us back

Dear Friends of the Heart of Christ,

One of my “hobbies” (yes, even cloistered nuns have hobbies) is photography. Years ago, before I entered the monastery, I became interested in taking photos of captivating subjects—people, plants, beautiful nature scenes, unusual lighting effects. Like Celine, the Carmelite sister of St. Therese, I was allowed to bring my camera equipment to the monastery and encouraged to use it. Fortunately, when I entered our Wilmington community, I had a very worthy predecessor in this art in the person of our Sister Francis de Sales Kaiser, who went to her heavenly reward at age 100 a few years ago. Her camera caught on film (mostly slides) the faces of our beloved Sisters who went before us and lived out their destinies within the confines of our Wilmington enclosure—one whole city block throbbing with devotion and religious commitment. So, I too have inherited this “calling” to be a monastic camera bug. This propensity for visual images often leads me to examine pictures or photographs very carefully. I am often intrigued by the expressions on people’s faces, and I like to study the countenances of the modern saints who have been captured on film. One of these who I would like to talk about today (since it is February and our presentations focus on holy men and women who had a special devotion to the Sacred Heart) is Blessed Charles de Foucauld.

Charles de Foucauld (1858-1916) had quite a life. A recent article on him is sub-titled: *From Playboy to Beatified Hermit*. Contrasting photos of his face from before his conversion and after his conversion are quite telling. Before his conversion we see the countenance of a young man immersed in the things of this world. Friends often referred to him as “Fats Foucauld.” His indulgence in food and fleshly pleasures made him into a classic hedonist who cared little about what others thought as long as he could engage in his own interests. As he himself would repeat at this stage in his life, “I sleep long, I eat a lot, I think little.”

Born in France in 1858, Charles de Foucauld lost both his parents at age six. He and his younger sister were put under the care of his grandmother, who unexpectedly died a few months later. But his grandfather, a wealthy aristocrat, provided liberally for the children. By the time of high school, Charles had lost his Catholic faith. Wealthy and dissipated, he barely graduated from military academy. He describes himself like this: “At age 17, I was totally selfish, full of vanity and irreverence, engulfed by a desire for what was evil. I was running wild.”

Joining the military, de Foucauld defied his superiors by keeping a mistress. His early life reads like the tabloids. The definite biography of him by Jean-Jacques Antier relates his early escapades in such a way that the reader is left to marvel at the graces God bestowed on the man to change his heart so drastically. Sent to northern Africa as an officer of the French Army, he was gradually converted from a life of rampant self-gradification to one of extreme selflessness and fervor. As a soldier and later as an explorer in the uncharted territory of Morocco, his spirit matured into a serious seeker after righteousness and goodness.

Back in France at age 28, Charles had a profound conversion to Christ. At age 32, he entered the Trappist Order, first in France and then on the Syrian-Turkish border, but eventually left to follow a vocation of solitary prayer and hospitality in the Sahara in French Algeria. Later he moved to southern Algeria to be near the nomadic Tuareg peoples, where he shared their hardships and witnessed to his Catholic faith among the neighboring Muslims. He aspired to found a new religious community dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, but no aspirant persevered to share his truly ascetic lifestyle. Charles was murdered at age 58 by a startled bandit, 15 year old Sermi ag Thora, who shot him through the head, killing him instantly. He was beatified in 2005.

To view a picture of Charles de Foucauld at age 49, one sees a completely different countenance from his earlier life. His garb now consists of a poor white habit with a prominent red heart on the front, topped by a cross. His face, turned directly toward the viewer, is calm and ethereal. One is taken by his eyes which sparkle with a heavenly light. His whole demeanor speaks volumes

of a man with a humble, open, selfless heart. Here is a soul who is filled with the love of the Sacred Heart and who only wants to share that love with others. His manner of reaching them was peaceful but ardent. He describes his apostolate among the Muslims this way: "As we become closer, I speak, always or almost always privately, of the good God, briefly, giving to each one what he can take, flight from sin, acts of perfect love, acts of perfect contrition, the two great commandments of the love of God and neighbor, examination of conscience, meditation on the four last things, thinking of God at the sight of his creatures..." One day in 1903 he wrote in his diary: "Let each one of us offer to the Sacred Heart prayers and penance for the conversion of the Muslims and the arrival of many holy workers in this field of the Heavenly Father, that each may be not only a good example, but a perpetual 'divine' example, and *alter Christus*. Then grace will descend, ignorance will disappear, goodwill will spring up. Jesus will reign..."

What made Charles undergo such a drastic change in his life—from an atheistic pleasure-loving soldier turned explorer to a real man of God who professed to want "to make the greatest sacrifice to Him that I can make?" His own words give us a hint: "At the beginning of the year 1886, after six months of family life, while in Paris getting my journey to Morocco published, I found myself in the company of people who were highly intelligent, highly virtuous and highly Christian. At the same time, an extremely strong interior grace was pushing me. Even though I wasn't a believer I started going to church. It was the only place where I felt at ease, and I would spend long hours there repeating this strange prayer; 'My God, if you exist, allow me to know you!'"

God's powerful hand was upon Charles, the sinner. Yet he, like all of us, had the free-will to accept God's grace or to turn away from it and continue to go his own way. De Foucauld writes, "Oh, My God, how much your hand was upon me and yet how little I was aware of it. How good you are! How you protected me! How you covered me with your wings when I did not even believe in your existence!" Charles did not turn his back on God, no matter how difficult it was. "Circumstances," he wrote, "obliged me to be chaste. It was necessary so as to prepare my soul to receive the truth; the demon too easily masters a soul that is not chaste." The young seeker was led to a wise priest, the Abbé Henri Huvelin who directed him to go to confession. He emerged a new man, and declared, "If there is joy in heaven over one sinner who is converted, there was joy when I went into this confessional. My Lord Jesus, you have put into me this tender and growing love for you, this taste for prayer, this faith in your word, this deep feeling of the duty of almsgiving, this desire to imitate you..."

Charles de Foucauld's life, I believe, is a good example of how God can change even the most straying of his "sheep." Taking an inventory of our own families, friends and the world at large, we can detect so many situations that give us cause for pause. But God's all-powerful hand can effect marvels. Let us never forget the words of the Sacred Heart of Jesus to St. Margaret Mary: "I will triumph in spite of all opposition."

What makes people change? I think this account by Heather King, a Catholic convert and recovered alcoholic has some enlightening thoughts:

The first time I ever sincerely prayed, I didn't even know whether I believed in God. I had no picture of God, no theology beyond eighth grade Sunday school. I was a lawyer, on paper. I thought religion was for simple, stupid people who didn't have the courage to see the world clearly, as I believed I did. I was in the throes of acute alcoholism, and I had a moment of truth in the woods in Nashville, when I realized very clearly that if I didn't stop drinking I would die. I realized... that no human power can save me. And on the instant, and instinctively, the way a child who perceives himself to be in danger without thinking grabs his parent's hand, I turned to God. I said the Lord's Prayer. That I did pray—not that the prayer was answered, but that I prayed—is the surest proof of God I know. Because the prayer came from somewhere utterly beyond... I was an atheist in a foxhole and I prayed and then I went in and mixed another pitcher of gin-and-tonic. But a few months later my family had an intervention and shipped me off (for help). I've never had another drink.

Heather goes on to reflect on the scripture verse from John 14:14: "If you ask anything of me in my name, I will do it." She believes that the key is in the phrase 'in my name' and explains that it isn't just by saying the words 'Jesus Christ' but that we must be utterly convinced of our own lack of power and be open to Jesus' help. Heather says that when she first got sober, she thought, "Yeah, I get it, I have to grow up, I have to look at the stuff I've done wrong and make amends." She finally realized that the reason we do things according to God's laws is to come alive, we follow the rules to come alive. Now, many of us never get to that point without having descended to rock bottom. To acknowledge that we need help and need to change takes tremendous intellectual honesty. And we are all susceptible to a kind of spiritual obtuseness that can gradually harden our hearts. It happens everywhere, for the forces of evil are always trying to lead us astray.

Often we hear during the church's liturgy the verse from the Letter to the Hebrews that reads, "If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts" (3:7-8). There are many people out there who are kindhearted, gentle and hard-working, yet they never reach spiritual maturity because they hear again and again the Lord's words but continually justify their sins, calling evil good and good evil. As one spiritual writer has averred, "It is a dangerous thing to come into God's house and go through the motions of worship." God wants pure hearts and desires that we worship him in spirit and in truth. In biblical history, the Lord warned such people that if they were never going to change their hearts, he would not speak his words to them and would leave them to their own devices. The Sacred Heart of Jesus desires the salvation of all peoples and is calling us to his heart. Will we reform our ways and turn back to him? Will the world finally come to its senses and return to our loving God, living by his statutes and following his ways? Time is passing and the last fervent calls are being made by the Hearts of Jesus and Mary. Let us pray that many souls will be awakened and respond to them. +

This talk on Sacred Heart spirituality was given in our Gathering Room on February 5th, 2017. If you would like to attend similar presentations by the sisters, our next talk will be held on Sunday, March 5th, 2017 at 4:00 p.m.