

Charles de Foucauld: “Islam provoked in me a deep concern”

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Next December 1st marks the centenary of the death of Charles de Foucauld, the french "missionary monk" killed in Tamanrasset, in the Saharan desert, by a marauding group in the context of the First World War.

But, although he was murdered in muslim lands and by muslim men, blessed Charles isn't a martyr of the Church in the traditional sense of the term, nor the responsibility of his death can be directly attributed to Islam as a religion. At the distance of a century it is still lawful to ask ourselves: what took the Viscount de Foucauld to give his life for the Tuareg and Saharan tribes that he loved as friends?

The world we live in is regarded by observers in many ways: the age of chaos, anxiety, fear, psychosis. And none of it can escape the feeling of fear that Islam instills in the Western world. This great monotheistic religion today is undoubtedly the most contested, the most condemned, the most "caricatured"; however, we need to keep it in mind and repeat that we usually have a distorted image of Islam. One thing, however, is shared by the vast majority: in the fifteen years that separate us from September 11, we saw our lives changing profoundly and many of our hopes vanishing. Before our very eyes – says Mario Calabresi – the labour world was dramatically changed, the economy and finances, the idea of international relations, European ideals and the way we live. A key role was the terrorism of Islamic matrix, the constant new forms of jihadism and the waves of refugees and migrants who came to our Coasts. While in the past the encounter with Islam concerned specially Middle East Christians or the Arab world passionates, today, like it or not, we are all called to reflect on it, because it concerns all of us.

Charles de Foucauld was born in Strasbourg, in 1858, soon he was orphaned of both parents and, along with sister Marie, was entrusted to the maternal grandfather, a retired colonel. In his adolescence, in a cultural climate marked by the Enlightenment and the legacy of the French Revolution, he was moved away completely from faith and lived in full religious indifference, "without believing and denying nothing", will he one day write to his friend Henri de Castries. Following the family tradition, he took a military career, but after a number of adversities he decided to leave the army and devoted his time to the exploration of new lands. Those were the years of colonization of North Africa by the Europeans and the discovery of new territories was a passion for many.

From June 1883 to May 1884, Charles de Foucauld also embarked the dangerous adventure of entering in Morocco, land closed to Europeans, disguised as Jewish and helped by a guide. It was

a dangerous journey but everything turned out well. He published his works under the title *Riconnaissance au Maroc* and got the gold medal of the *Société de Géographie de Paris* due to the high scientific value of his work. However, besides the great success of the expedition, Charles was struck in particular by two unique characteristics of Islam men: hospitality and prayer.

The host is sacred for Muslims, it's a duty for all, in the image of Abraham. Then it's the prayer as "loving submission to God." For a young European, rational and without religion, the contact with the faith of Muslims, souls that live continuously in the presence of God, who practice their faith with pride, without being ashamed, made him understand something much larger and more true than all earthly activities: "Islam provoked in me a deep concern", he confesses to Castries. And at first he wanted to become a Muslim: "I began to study Islam".

From the “higher” God to the God “infinitely small”

Near the end of October 1886, Charles de Foucauld, after a long period of discernment and helped by people that were very dear to him, rediscovers the faith of his childhood: "Since I knew that God existed, I could not help but to live only for Him"... What happened in the heart of this man initially impressed by the Islamic faith to then end in friendship with Jesus of Nazareth? And above all, what was his attitude in the relation with Muslims after having understood that the Almighty God and "totally other" of Islam became tiny and close to every man in the Incarnation event?

Meanwhile, we could say that the expression "living only for God" reflects in a certain way the absolute monotheism of Islam's profession of faith: "I testify that there is no other God but God". Indeed, it is possible to speak about “Viscount Charles de Foucauld” before and "Brother Charles of Jesus" after the personal encounter with Jesus.

The spiritual journey of Charles can be described with the term "lowering". He begins, from the Gospel, to know the story of Jesus who became a "a poor worker" in Nazareth. But Jesus is also a gift of the Father "who so much loved the world". He, despite being God, bent down, annihilated himself to death (cf. Phil 2: 5-11). Charles wants to imitate the life of Jesus: although he was rich, renounces to fame, to the family affections, abandons everything and sets out, this time for a different operation from the one of Morocco. Now he is no longer thirsty for glory and honor, but it is an absolute thirsty one for the Absolute with a penitent heart. After about seven years of living in France and especially in Syria, he obtained permission from his superiors to move in to Nazareth as an hermit and thus be able to "touch hands" with the event of Jesus.

He spends long hours in silent adoration before Jesus Eucharist, assiduously reads the gospel

and especially attends the Annunciation cave every morning. It is in this context that he understands better that God took the initiative, took the first step for love towards men, humbled himself by turning himself in one of us, therefore, concludes Charles. If he lived as one of us, it means that made it possible for each of us to imitate his life . "It wasn't the desire to see your glory increased that made you create the world, incarnate your Word and give birth to Jesus... it is the desire to involve other beings besides you in your wealth, your happiness, your life".

In his written meditations, Nazareth hermit gradually emerges its extraordinary discovery: our God is not narcissistic. He is altruism, love: God's nature is relational, trinitarian, it is love that is freely given, that creates man in his image, brings men to his happiness, his divine life and incarnates to make his image shine in them. This route partially explains the determination of Charles de Foucauld to take Jesus to those who do not know Him, wanting him known not through preaching, but living the gospel. Entering into relationships with others, with different, those who do not share their faith but who witnessed his presence. In recent years it will be dedicated with love to know and make known the riches of the Tuareg people, anticipating the idea of inculturation that Vatican II had advanced.

Based on these insights, we believe that the spirituality of blessed Charles de Foucauld could light the way of the Church and perhaps society, confronting the great challenges of meeting-confrontation with the diverse and complex Muslim world. The climate of violence and mistrust that was exacerbated in recent years threatens to undermine the efforts and the will for dialogue, encounter. Instead, we are called to value the way that Charles de Foucauld opened, setting an innovation at that time: "build bridges, not walls", share friendship gestures in everyday life, without naïf and without idealistic initiatives but in respect for diversity. Another crucial issue: know ourselves. Fear increases when you do not know. Charles began to study Islam, he learned the language of the Tuareg friends and always tried to understand them. Welcomed them in his heart.

When we speak about dialogue, usually comes the attempt to demand reciprocity (if they can build mosques in our countries, we should also be able to build churches in their countries). Reciprocity could perhaps be taken into account from a political point of view. But never from theological point. The Church must remember that the Incarnation event did not ask us reciprocity, it is a pure gift of unconditional love and without false expectations. It is the initiative of the Father who enters into a relationship with us. If we don't assume the event of the Incarnation, there is no gospel. The path is long and maybe full of hardships, but the christian community is guided by the Spirit of Him who gave His life for all men.