



THE VISION OF THE GOSPEL

that filled the mind and heart

of

BROTHER CHARLES

IAN LATHAM

Ian Latham is a Little Brother of Jesus. He lives on a Council estate at Peckham in South East London and works as a cleaner at the Victoria and Albert museum. In the summer of 1990 he gave a number of talks to a group of priests in the Jesus Caritas fraternity on the vision of the Gospel that Charles de Foucauld developed during his life. I felt they deserved a wider audience and persuaded Ian to have them produced as a little booklet. I am delighted that he agreed to this proposition as I consider this to be the best presentation of what the Gospel meant to Charles and how he came to discover his 'Nazareth' vocation. The last two chapters were added later.

Alec Fraser

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CHARLES de FOUCAULD - some key dates

- 15 Sept 1858** Born in Strasbourg (on the Franco-German border), as a member of the French aristocracy.
- 13 Aug 1861** Birth of Marie, his only sibling.
- 1864** Death of mother, followed by death of father - a shattering experience for the two children, who go to live with their maternal grandparents.
- 1869** Establishes the beginning of a lifelong friendship with Marie Moitessier, his cousin, when celebrating her 19th birthday (later, married and known as Marie de Bondy).
- 28 April 1872** First Holy Communion, a happy and 'pious' occasion. (age 13).
- 1874** Towards end of year loses the faith (age 16).
- June 1876** Enters military school of Saint-Cyr.
- 1878** Death of beloved grandfather, who leaves him a fortune.
- 1879** At cavalry school in Saumur, where he lives a life of wild extravagance...
- Dec 1880** Posted as sub-lieutenant to Algeria (taking 'Mimi', his mistress, whom he presents as his wife).
- Mar 1881** Dismissed for 'notorious misconduct'...

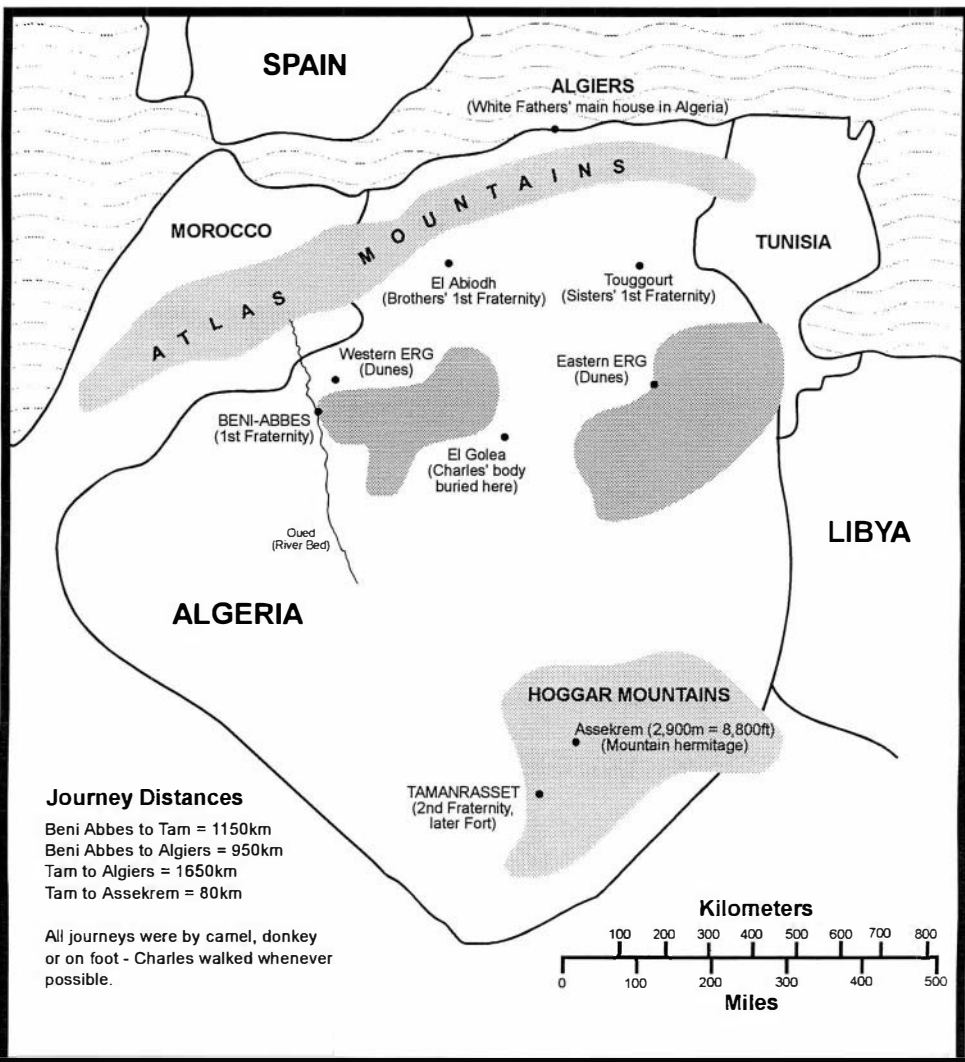
- May 1881 Reinstated, at his request, for campaign in South Oran.
- 2 Jan 1882 Bored, resigns commission.
- 25 June 1883 Exploration of Morocco, carefully prepared
- 23 May 1884 during 1882.
- 1885 Publishes book, Exploration in Morocco.
- Feb 1886 Takes a flat in Paris near the church of St Augustine (which his cousin Marie de Bondy attended and where the Abbé Huvelin was curate). Begins to pray: *'My God, if you exist, make me know you'*.
- 30 Oct 1886 Gift of faith, through confession (to Abbé Huvelin) and communion, leading to gift of self to God... *'As soon as I believed that there was a God, I understood that I could do nothing else but live for him'...*
- 1887, '88, '89 Searching for his personal vocation, goes on a pilgrimage to Holy Land (on Huvelin's advice), where Jesus' life in Nazareth particularly strikes him.
- 16 Jan 1890 Enters Trappist monastery of Our Lady of the Snows, in France (Ardèche), and soon after, at his request, leaves for poor 'Trappe' in Akbes, Syria, where he stays for 7 years...
- 6 Nov 1896 Leaves for Rome, to study theology, as requested by the Abbot General.

- 16 Jan 1897** Places his future (to remain a Trappist or to depart) in the hands of the Abbot-General and his council, who, surprisingly, on 23 January, confirm his 'Nazareth' vocation.
- 24 Feb 1897** Arrives in the Holy Land (Jaffa), and goes to Nazareth, where he finds employment as a domestic with the Poor Clares.
- Autumn 1898** Sent to Jerusalem, to the Poor Clare convent there. Meets Mother Elizabeth, who asks him to consider ordination...
- 1900** Charles is full of differing plans - priestly ordination? founding a community? living as a hermit on Mount of Beatitudes?
- 16 Aug 1900** Returns to France (Marseille)...
- 29 Sept 1900** Returns to Our Lady of the Snows to prepare for Holy Orders.
- 9 June 1901** Ordained priest (Viviers, France).
- 28 Oct 1901** Arrives in Beni-Abbes, with the intention of founding a community ('une fraternité'), and later of entering Morocco...
- 30 Oct 1901** Celebrates first Mass - exactly 15 years after his conversion - age 43.
- 1902** Welcomes the poor and sick and any visitor. Calls himself 'Frère universel'.
- 6 Jan 1902** A long trip, mainly with Colonel Laperrine, to
- 24 Jan 05 Southern Algeria.

3 May 1905	Leaves for the Hoggar (Touareg country).
13 Aug 1905	Arrives in Tamanrasset (which becomes his base until his death in 1916).
3 Nov 1906	Returns briefly to Beni-Abbes, visits Algiers (White Fathers) where he finds a companion, Frère Michel.
25 Dec 1906	At Beni-Abbes, whence they set out for Tamanrasset.
March 1907	Michel is sick and has to return to Algiers
25 Dec 1907	Charles is alone at Tamanrasset and cannot celebrate Mass, a great blow to him...
Feb 1908	Falls very seriously sick, having deprived himself to give food to the children in time of severe famine, and is only saved by the help of the people.
Dec 1908	Leaves Tamanrasset for France, to found a lay association: lay people to be apostles, not by preaching, but by showing respect and real charity through daily contact and prayer.
1909	Visit of Doctor Claude Herisson, an important witness to Charles' character and way of life...
Spring 1910	Second trip to France, to encourage the lay association. Meets Abbé Crozier, a keen supporter.
1910	Death of Abbé Huvelin.
7 July 1911	First Mass at Assekrem hermitage (8,000ft)

- 27 April 1913 Third trip to France with young Ouksem (aged 21)
 - 27 Sept 1913 also to see his sister and cousin, and to further the
 association.
- Autumn 1913 Goes again to Assekrem.
- 15 Sept 1914 Resolves to stay at Tamanrasset, on hearing of
 outbreak of war in Europe: *'my place is here'*.
- Dec 1914 Seriously sick with scurvy.
- June 1915 Completes dictionary (eleven years work).
- Sept
 - Oct 1916 Constructs a fort ('bordj') to protect the people of
 Tamanrasset against raiding groups of Senoussi
 soldiers from southern Libya...
- 15 Sept 1916 58th birthday.
- 30 Oct 1916 30th anniversary of conversion.
- 1 Dec 1916 7pm, the fort is raided, and Charles, tricked by a
 false friend, is dragged out and, in a moment of
 panic, shot through the head.
- 21 Dec 1916 Charles' body is found and, next to it, close by, his
 monsternace with the Host still in it, intact...
- 25 Dec 1916 Moussa, the local Touareg chief, writes to Charles'
 sister: 'Charles the Marabout has died, not only for all
 of you, he has died for us too. May God have mercy
 on him, and may we meet in Paradise'.

SKETCH MAP OF ALGERIA



The FAITH of Charles de Foucauld

How does Charles de Foucauld see his own life? Let us join him in Nazareth at the age of forty (in 1898). He is recalling, first, his childhood faith, then the total loss of this faith in adolescence, then the events leading up to his conversion, and finally, in brief, what followed from that key moment up to the present time in 1898. I think it is good to follow him on his life's journey, his 'pilgrimage of faith'...

'Son of a holy mother, as soon as I could utter a word, I learnt from her to know and love You, and to pray to You'. Charles, born in Strasbourg in 1858, of an old aristocratic family, was brought up in an atmosphere of traditional but authentic piety. *'I can see myself going to church with my father (so long ago), then with my grandfather...I can see my grandmother and cousins going to daily Mass...'* Charles recollects three things about his childhood: the deep family piety, the atmosphere of affection, and his own happiness in this context of piety and affection. True, he was marked by the sorrow of the death of both his parents when only five, and later by the flight from Strasbourg in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 when twelve, and these sad events affected his character with a tendency to turn back on himself; but, in spite of the opinion of several biographers, it is the real and positive values of his childhood experience that provide the human foundation of his faith conversion.

The words 'pious' and 'piety' recur frequently in Charles' childhood memories, and these words well describe the specific acts which he

recalls: visiting wayside calvaries, offering flowers to the statue of Mary, visiting the Blessed Sacrament, even the 'pious' preparation for first Holy Communion. Certainly, his mother, grandfather, and cousin Marie were persons of deep and genuine faith, personal faith, but Charles' own 'faith' as a child was embedded in the shared, communal piety of his family. It had not yet, I would think, sprouted, but remained a seed. For piety is essentially a social attitude, linked to family and country, to religious practice and culture. It contains a respect for God and his benefits, but refracted through the given milieu. Faith is something far more: a personal response to the personal God, freely given, freely accepted, fully 'mine'.

Of course, piety and faith are normally associated: piety is the normal seedbed for the growth of faith and for its visible expression. But in our secular age the two are divorced, and so faith has to be born in a religious desert, like a cactus rooted in the bare sand. Charles was more fortunate...but when his childhood piety was undermined in adolescence, the hidden seed of faith was swept away with it.

How did this come about? Charles, now more withdrawn, was an avid reader. From the age of twelve he read and absorbed the intellectual sceptics then in vogue: Voltaire, Montaigne, Littré.. *'The equal faith with which different religions were held'*, he wrote, *'appeared as the condemnation of them all'* (letter to H de C 1902). Again *'Nothing about God can be proved'*, and *'Truth cannot be found'*... In other words, Charles rejected the truth of the Christian religion, and hence faith in God's self-revelation. Later he will say *'I despaired of truth'*, and it was truth that he yearned for and searched after.

It was only afterwards, on losing truth, that he began, as he says, *'doing evil'*. No longer looking towards the God of goodness, he let

his natural energies have free rein. He wasted himself and his fortune.. a waste of what is good, rather than a committing of positive evil, but a waste that left a 'profound inner emptiness' in the midst of outward plenty and merry socializing.

It was, then, from nothingness that Charles was led to living faith. Can we trace, without over-schematizing, the steps of this process? It lasted some seven years. Dismissed from the army, his chosen career, for 'notorious misconduct', Charles requests re-admission, as a simple soldier if need be, on hearing that his regiment is being summoned to fight 'insurgents' in Algeria. To the surprise of his men and fellow officers, he shows courage in danger, companionship with others, and an attraction for the austerity of the desert. Circumstances challenge him, and he begins to find himself.

Leaving the army again, this time of his own accord, when the action is over, he searches consciously for a new challenge: to explore Morocco, at that time closed to Europeans. This involves serious study of language and cartography, and, once begun, an extended experience of poverty of means and of racial rejection (due to his disguise as a Rabbi accompanying a genuine Rabbi). Forced to be poor, he becomes more 'open'. Two things strike him - the ritual acts of adoration by the Muslim men, and the hospitality of his hosts even at the risk of their own safety. A new sense of something Great 'above' humanity and a new awareness of human relations as 'fraternal' begins, almost imperceptibly, to grow upon him.

His journey accomplished, Charles returns to Paris and sets about writing up his explorations. This task required exactitude and patience, and brought Charles in contact again with his family, as well as with geographical experts. Fully occupied, and at ease in himself and with those around, Charles finds a natural attraction for chastity; and this in turn, as he later remarks, opens the door towards the search for truth. Is there any ultimate truth? Charles is

haunted by this question. It is, of course, for him an existential question: he wants a truth to live by, but it must be recognised by him as purely and simply true. *'My God, if you exist, make me know it'* (notes) or *'...make me know You'* (letter). It is a search 'without belief' as yet, but 'a search for truth'.

These three stages led up to the final act: his own act, but first and foremost, the act of God. How? God had, he says, 'two helpers', each in their way 'instruments' of His action - Abbé Huvelin and his cousin, Marie de Bondy. His cousin, Marie, drew him by her 'presence', by her 'silence' without reprimand or persuasion, and by her radiant 'goodness and holiness'. Her role was that of Mary carrying Christ, and so, by that, radiating Christ; radiating Him through the 'influence' of her ordinary actions for others. This, obviously, was a gradual process. The Abbé Huvelin's role was more punctual and precise. Charles heard of him as being 'learned' and ready to discuss, and went to consult him for this reason. But the unexpected happened: *'I asked for lessons in religion: he made me kneel and confess, and sent me on the spot to receive communion'*. Unexpected for Charles, unexpected of the Abbé. For he was not at all the man to force anyone, or even to hurry a movement; rather he was noted for his extreme delicacy and tact. It seems, then, to have been an 'inspiration' on his part for this person at this moment. Indeed, Charles speaks of it as God's moment: *'what a day of blessing. You gave me all that is good'...*

'As soon as I believed that there was a God, I understood that I couldn't do otherwise than live for Him: my religious vocation dates from the same hour as my faith...' (letter to H de C 1902). What did Charles encounter through confession and communion? Quite simply Jesus and his love - an experience of Love given and a desire to love in return...ALL and all.

SOME QUOTATIONS

A From the Bible:

My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it' (Luke 8, 21. Cf Luke 1, 45 'Blessed are you who have believed' and the parable of the sower Luke 8, 12-15).

B From Vatican II:

By this revelation (of Himself and His will) God addresses men as his friends...and invites them into his company. By faith a man commits his entire self to God...willingly assenting to his revelation (DV 2 & 5).

C From Brother Charles:

From a meditation written in Nazareth, November 1897, referring to his conversion in Paris, October 1886: *'By what prodigies of invention, God of all goodness, did you help me to know you?...I felt an urge to go into your churches, I who did not believe in you; my mind was troubled, in anguish at searching and searching for the truth; I prayed. My God, if you exist, help me to know you!'... A marvellous helper you had (his cousin, Marie de Bondy) who worked in silence, with gentleness, goodness and deep holiness... You drew me to the truth by the beauty of her soul...I asked to be instructed: he (the Abbé Huvelin) made me kneel down and make my confession, and then go at once to communion...'*

From a letter to an army friend who was losing his faith:

'The good Lord who had begun so powerfully the work of my conversion, concluded it by such a strong interior grace that it pushed me, almost irresistibly, into the church; the priest, then unknown to me,...combined great learning with still greater virtue and goodness, and he became my confessor and over the last fifteen years my best friend.

As soon as I believed there was a God, I saw that the only course open to me was to devote myself entirely to Him; my religious vocation dates from the same moment as my faith'.

From above letter: *'To begin with, faith had a lot of obstacles to overcome: I who doubted so much, didn't believe everything in a day...but God's grace and my confessor's advice cleared away these clouds'.*

On Matthew 8,26: *'Let's have this faith which banishes all fear: we have beside us, facing us, in us, our Lord Jesus, our God who loves us infinitely, is all-powerful, knows what is best for us, tells us to seek the Kingdom and that the rest will be given us...' (Akbes).*

On Matthew 9,22: *'Real faith ... causes every impossibility to disappear; makes a nonsense of those words 'anxiety', 'danger', 'fear'; makes us walk through life with calm, peace and deep joy, like a child holding its mother's hand' (Akbes).*

On Matthew 14,31: *'Jesus says 'Come', and we have the grace to walk on the waves. It seems impossible to us, but Jesus is the Master of the impossible...Let's walk along the Way where He calls us with an absolute faith, for heaven and earth will pass, but His word will not pass'.*

Retreat at Nazareth: *'Faith sheds a new light on everything.. The person who lives by faith is full of new thoughts, new tastes, new judgments... New horizons open before him...and, necessarily, he begins an entirely new life...'.*

(This text refers to the Beatitudes, the Eucharist, Matthew 25,40, Mark 8,34-35, Mark 10,43-45, Matthew 6,30-33..)

Jesus as 'PRESENCE'

For Brother Charles, Jesus is the One who is present; this, I think, is something that strikes us immediately. It's something we feel in Charles, himself, and which, in his company, influences our own approach to Jesus.

Presence is the answer to isolation. Two people, each one separate and alone, are walking through a park. One, tired, sits on a bench. Later, the other feels inclined to do the same, and finds a space on the bench. After a while, they swap a few routine phrases ('What a summer!' - 'Yes, isn't it?...'). Then one confides 'I'm feeling so sad: my wife, you know...died last month!'. And the other replies 'I'm so sorry, I know what you are feeling....' And the next day they meet again... Physical proximity opens out into personal presence. In fact, there is no real presence except that of persons; and this presence of persons to one another is only realised through a recognition of the other and a giving of oneself to that other, leading to the shared recognition and self-giving of friendship, provided that the movement is brought to fulfilment.

Of course God's presence is something quite unique: an apparent absence that is really total presence. For with God, simply being and being present are one and the same. And so He's closer to us than we are to ourselves, as Augustine says. But, paradoxically, we aren't, and in the main can't be, aware of this, at least directly. The marvellous signs and the prophetic word, coupled with the sages' reflections, are a first move towards closing this gap. But it's only, I think, with the Incarnation that God becomes present for us. And it's only through the gift of the Spirit that we can recognise this

presence of God-with-us and respond to it, so that the all-present God becomes effectively present to us. For an unrecognised presence is not properly a presence: there needs to be mutuality. John's gospel, in particular, reveals this presence in the full sense, and the wonders of it.

Charles, it is I think clear, was struck by this 'presence' of the Beloved. In fact, he was seized by it, and it becomes the dominant note of his spiritual path. At first he finds this presence above all in the Blessed Sacrament. Jesus is 'there', in front of him; and so he can 'talk' with Jesus - speaking, listening, resting in silence... So he feels the urge to spend long moments simply 'there', present to 'the presence', present with love to the presence of Love.

For Charles this is the expression of an intensely personal relationship. And because personal it develops. If Jesus is present in the Sacrament, he's also present in the word of the Gospels: there, and there alone, we can see him acting, hear his words, follow his journey.., and so are stimulated to join him and walk with him. Most of his meditations are gospel meditations; and some of his texts, such as 'Le modèle unique' are nothing but strings of gospel quotes, largely of Jesus' words. For, as he says, to love is to imitate..

This personal relationship with Jesus' presence in word and sacrament grows, at Beni-Abbes in particular, into the recognition of Jesus' presence in the person who comes, whoever that may be, and especially in 'the least'. In fact the Eucharistic presence and the Neighbour presence are explicitly connected: *'the one who said 'this is my body' said 'whatever you do to the least of my brethren you do to Me' - no word of the gospel has more impressed me'...*

Later, when in Tamanrasset, Charles is faced with the question: should he stay with the people, with the few local Touareg families, without the possibility of celebrating or reserving the Eucharist; or,

on the contrary, should he return to Beni-Abbes, or somewhere further north, to have again the opportunity of the Mass with a server as then required, but leaving, perhaps permanently, the Touareg people whose lives he had come to share, and which he alone could do? *'It's hard to spend Christmas without Mass'* (1907).

How does he reason? *'Formerly I tended to see on one side the Infinite, the holy Sacrifice, and on the other the finite, everything apart from God, and was always ready to sacrifice anything to celebrate Holy Mass. But there must have been a mistake in my reasoning here, for from the time of the apostles the greatest saints have sometimes sacrificed the possibility of celebrating to works of spiritual charity, to make journeys and so on...It is good to live alone in the land (the Hoggar); one can do things there, even though they are of no great importance, for one becomes 'at home' there - easily available to people and quite 'ordinary'. (July 1907 to Mgr Guerin).*

What does this mean? It shows, I think, that the living presence of Jesus and his sacrifice, of which the Eucharist is the privileged sign, is personally internalised. Charles lives in Jesus and his love, in line with the words 'I am the vine, you are the branches: abide in Me.., abide in my Love..' This is, or should be, the normal Christian experience. Is there anything proper to Charles in this? Perhaps two things. The simplicity of looking at Jesus, in himself and with others. And then, living this 'simple looking' in the context of ordinary daily life and interpersonal contacts.

Charles 'presence' to Jesus and to people corresponds to Jesus' 'presence' to his Father and to the people. While an end in itself, as the presence leading to the intimacy of friendship, this presence, seen dynamically, is for the one sacrifice: 'he offered himself'. It is as 'one of us', sharing our experiences and in solidarity with our human community and ultimate destiny, that Jesus offered himself. On the

the cross, yes; but first day by day in the 'ordinariness' of Nazareth... Charles had long felt urged to share in this saving 'work' of Jesus. To begin with, he realises this through monastic asceticism and the sacramental offering of the Eucharist. Later, while never putting aside the irreplaceable value of these things, he sees, more and more, the importance of assuming daily life as it comes, as it is 'given', with all its ups and downs., in brief, taking on our common joys and sorrows (cf. opening sentences of Gaudium et Spes). As always, Charles is here trying to follow the way of Jesus, who 'assumed' our common human condition, so as, by doing so, to redeem it. And, as Charles is constantly telling himself, we are called to enter into his 'work'. By using the word 'work' to express the redemption, Charles is linking up Jesus' work at Nazareth with his 'work' as saviour, both in the activities of his ministry and in the accepted sufferings of his death. This is in line with the 'whatever the Father does, I do' (Jn 5, 19). As Charles Dodd remarks, this passage could be an echo of the boy Jesus watching his father Joseph at work, and learning to copy his actions; so 'the Father loves the Son and shows him everything he himself does'. From the beginning Jesus undertakes the Father's work, consciously so at the age of twelve (Lk 5,20), and this work, with its various stages, is basically one.

SOME QUOTATIONS

A From the Bible:

As they were talking and discussing together (the recent events), Jesus himself came near and walked with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. (Lk 24, 15 - the road to Emmaus)

Matthew 1,23: and they shall name him Emmanuel, that is God-with-us. Matthew 28,20: 'And look, I am with you - all days to the end of time ' (an 'inclusion').

Exodus 3,12: 'I am with you', God said.... 'I am who am'..

Revelation 21,3: 'Look, the tabernacle of God is with humans: He will tabernacle with them, and they will be his people, and he will be God-with-them'.

B From Vatican II:

By his incarnation, he, the Son of God, has in a certain way united himself to each human being. (Gaudium et Spes 22. Cf Redemptor Hominis 13 & 14: each concrete, historical person, without any exception whatever, becomes 'a sharer in Jesus Christ' - whether aware of it or not).

C From Brother Charles:

From a meditation at Nazareth: '*You, my Lord Jesus, are in the Holy Eucharist - you are here, so close to me, in the tabernacle... You're as close to me as you were to Mary when she carried you in her womb*'.

Retreat at Beni-Abbes: '*Make often, very often, a spiritual communion with no other limit than that of my love calling a hundred, a thousand times a day on my beloved Saviour*'.

To his sister from Nazareth: '*Mary Magdalen was no more alone in her grotto (after Jesus' ascension) than she was in Bethany... Jesus was no less present to her, and she was equally seated at his feet..That's my life too, my dear, as far as my weakness and wretchedness allow; try to make it yours also, more and more. It won't turn you away from your other occupations; it's just that instead of being alone, you'll be two to carry out your duties. It's enough to stop a minute and say, 'You are here, my God, I love you*'.

To a friend, 1908: '*We too (like Mary and Joseph when travelling), we've always the beloved with us*'.

To Louis Massignon, 1916: *'Search for Jesus and love him in the 'little ones', the sinful, the poor.. Go out of yourself with all your strength to Jesus in your neighbour; that's perhaps the best remedy for your temptations'.*

To a Trappist friend: *'Alone? I'm never alone. Jesus is always with me'.* (from Tamanrasset)

We should always do what is most pleasing to Jesus, keeping our gaze fixed continually on him, as Mary and Joseph did. (Notes February 1916)

See Jesus in every person, and act in consequence. (Notes 1909)

Being a BROTHER to one and all

'You have one Father and you are all brothers'. Charles quotes this text time and time again, and tries constantly to conform his actions to it. We can say, I think, that for Charles 'brotherhood' derives from Jesus and extends to every person, covering all their needs at every level. Let us then look at this more closely.

With Charles, all begins, always, with Jesus. Jesus is 'our beloved Brother and Lord'. The one who loves us and whom we love is - astonishingly - our Brother: astonishingly, for Charles first discovered him as God-with-us and as the Lord who gives and asks all. Our Brother because he is 'one of us' and because he 'shares our human condition' (cf Hebrews chapters 2 and 5 and Gaudium et Spes 22). As we know, Charles is particularly struck by the fact that Jesus shares our Nazareth situation: our simple ordinariness, with its daily routine of work, monotony and anonymity, as also the poverty and abjection of so many. And it is as our Brother that Jesus is 'obedient' to the Father, and 'journeys' towards the Father. An obedience in trust, a journey through suffering... that he calls us to 'follow'. 'I am ascending to my Father and to your Father' (John 20,17): this movement covers the whole of Jesus' life, from his boyhood to his death and glorification (cf Luke 1,50, 9,51, 23,46). And it is precisely as our Brother that Jesus, 'the firstborn among many brothers' (Rm 8, 30), draws us along with him, to share his life in our here-and-now and, in the end, his destiny. It is, that is, as our Brother that he shares our life, in all its humanness, and, by so doing, invites us to share his life of sonship with the Father, so that we are with him 'sons in the Son' (St Augustine).

For Charles, Jesus as our Brother, applies not only to Christians, but

also - and equally - to every person, whatever their religion or lack of it. Charles sees Jesus primarily in his Nazareth situation: he is among us as our brother. A brother first to those who are of his family, to those who recognise and accept him; but a brother equally to all those around, to each and every person in the 'village', and, risen from the dead, to each and everyone everywhere, in each and every generation. A brother, moreover, who is present, walking with each person in their lifejourney. This truth, that Charles instinctively came to see, is, I think, a new discovery of our time. In fact to my mind, it only comes to clear expression in the first encyclical of John Paul, his programme/encyclical Redemptor Hominis. Commenting on Gaudium et Spes 22, he declares: 'with man - with each man without any exception whatever - Christ is in a way united, even when man is unaware of it'; and again, 'each one of the four thousand million human beings living in our planet has become a sharer in Jesus from the moment he is conceived'.

Let's analyse 'being a brother'. It is, surely, based on a recognition of equality: of being equally human, of being of equal worth, and so of having an equal dignity. This leads to an attitude of respect, and to its practical corollary, an attitude of concern. The whole of Charles' experience in the Hoggar is a witness to his growth in this recognition of others, so different in appearance, in culture and in religion, as being his equals, and hence as being worthy of respect. '*We are all brothers, and we hope one day to share the same heaven*' (1904). Notice the two levels of being brothers: as humans, and as having the same destiny. Charles' approach is always to begin with the practical and obvious human needs, and to work 'upwards' to the cultural and the religious.

A young Touareg girl, as she then was, recalled long after, how she would enjoy visiting the Marabout, 'He always smiled, and he never kept us waiting'. A simple enough remark, but full of meaning. For Charles was working long hours on his Touareg dictionary, and he

was a man of intense concentration and strict routine, never willing to waste a minute. Yet he was able - he became able - to 'waste time' with a canal child's visit, and to do so with pleasure. All his European visitors remark on his extraordinary capacity for work. Dr Claude Herisson, for example, was amazed at his industry: he read his meteorological instruments thrice daily, he received and answered meticulously an enormous mail, he noted down any fragment of Touareg verse on envelopes slit open and attached with a string to his belt, he welcomed numerous visitors, he had a detailed rhythm of prayer. And yet, adds the doctor, he was always ready to converse: on Christmas eve (1909) he laid aside his devotions, and spent long hours reminiscing and exchanging views, knowing that the doctor was a nonpractising member of the Reformed Church and that he needed company.

How did Charles come to achieve this simplicity of relating to people of all kinds? Partly, no doubt, through assimilating the ways of Jesus, fruit of his meditation, adoration and short repeated prayers. Partly, also, through learning to receive as well as to give. He came to the Touaregs with much to give: medicine, his native culture and the religion he had been given. But falling desperately sick, in January 1908, he was saved by his neighbours: they brought him goats' milk and barley bread, though it was a time of severe drought and famine. Relations changed, becoming reciprocal and natural: at the end, Moussa, the local chief, said, 'He was one of us'.

As I see it, there is today a 'call' for a greater realisation of brotherhood. Brotherhood, of course, is a relational term: it expresses a certain way of inter-relating, a way marked above all by a sense of equality, more exactly by a recognition of the other as having a human worth equal to what I am aware of as my own human worth.

This sounds obvious! But experience - our experience of our own

reactions and actions as well as our experience of how we see others acting - shows, all too clearly, we tend to 'down-grade' others. This is true both on the person to person level, and on the group to group level. I tend to see myself as 'first' and 'more', and, correlatively, you as 'second' and 'less': less not just in this or that quality, but less in human worth, less in humanness. Anger reveals these attitudes: 'you don't know', 'you don't care', 'You're just an animal'. And we all know the group reactions: 'they're not like us, they don't know how to behave, they've no responsibility, they're worse than beasts'.

Why is this? We learn, I think, to become aware of 'I' through the actions of others towards me as being for them a genuine 'I', and, later, my own reactions towards these others show me their 'I', and simultaneously our 'we', in both cases implicitly as being human and being equally human. The problem comes partly with the acceptance of members of another, 'outside' group, and partly with the new self-awareness of the adolescent, leading to a new self-importance. Both these attitudes are, in themselves, natural and positive: a true sense of self, a true sense of group solidarity. But it requires free acts of recognition of the other or others, and acceptance of them, and this free choosing of what is good does not happen of itself. In fact it needs the 'givenness' of self-lowering, of which the Incarnation is the model, to be able to do it.

SOME QUOTATIONS

A From the Bible:

Matthew 23,8 'you are all brothers'.

Matthew 12,50 'Here are my mother and my brothers - anyone who does the will of my Father is my brother, sister, mother'.

John 20,6 'Go and find my brothers, and tell them: I am ascending to my Father and to your Father'.

Hebrews 5,17 'So he had to become like his brothers in every way'.

B From Vatican II:

Lumen Gentium 32 'As the laity by divine choice have Christ as their brother... they also have as brothers those in the sacred ministry.

Gaudium et Spes: 'He(Christ) assures those who trust in God's charity that the way of love is open to all men and that the effort to establish a universal brotherhood will not be in vain'. Cf 91: 'This Council intends to help all - whether they believe in God or do not explicitly acknowledge him - to strive for a more deeply rooted sense of human brotherhood'.

See also the theme of equality: 'all are equal', both in the Church as sons of God (Lumen Gentium 32), and in the world as human beings of equal dignity (Gaudium et Spes 29).

C From Brother Charles:

To a friend, Henry de Castries, from Beni-Abbes, 29 November 1901: '*The constructions (chapel, three cells and room for guests) are called the Khouia, the 'fraternity', for Khouia Carlo is the universal brother. Pray God that I may be really, of all the souls of this country, the brother*'.

To his cousin, Marie de Bondy, 19 January 1902: '*I want to accustom all the inhabitants, Christians, Muslims, Jews and pagans, to look upon me as their brother, the universal brother. They are beginning to call the house 'the fraternity', and this delights me*'. Note: Elizabeth Hamilton well translates, '*a brother to all*'... '*as a brother to every one of them*'.

To Dom Martin, Abbot of Notre Dame des Neiges, 7 February 1902: *'Every day there are guests for supper, bed, breakfast, sometimes eleven in one night, not counting an old cripple who lives here. I have between sixty and a hundred visitors in a day... It never stops'.*

Constitution of Brothers 30: *'Give hospitality to all, as to beloved Brothers, to Christians or pagans, good or bad... Make no exception of persons, seeing in all Jesus alone. Rule 38: 'They should carry everyone in their heart, like the Brother Jesus who died for all'.*

Retreat at Ghardaia, Advent 1904: *'Faults: 7 - I haven't been fraternal with my neighbour. 14 - I haven't been familiar and fraternal with the local people. 15 - I haven't treated the local people as my equals but as my inferiors. 20 - I fear dirt and vermin. 35 - I haven't insisted enough that people call me 'Brother' rather than 'Father'... Remedies: 9 - I should give, not just material things, but my effort and time, and all the signs of fraternal equality and fraternal welcome. For example, instead of simply giving some barley and telling a guest to make his bread, I should prepare the bread and cook it myself. Yes, I should do what the Blessed Virgin and our Lord Jesus would do in a similar case at Nazareth'.*

Praying as RELATIONSHIP with God

Simplicity, absolute simplicity..that is what marks Charles' way of praying. As breathing for the body, so is praying for the soul. In fact, he makes this comparison himself: breathing in is like receiving God, breathing out like giving back what he has given.

His basic approach can be summed up in the 'formula': loving attention to Jesus. We could add... to Jesus present, and supposing always, Jesus as Love incarnate. This, surely, is in the pure gospel tradition: 'This is my Son, my Beloved, listen to Him', 'Remain in me.. in my Word.. in my Love'(John 15 and the whole of 1 John). It is also in line with the way of Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, whom Charles constantly read and recommended. Of course, Charles personalises this gospel and Carmelite way of praying in his own fashion. It follows that we may wish to express it differently, in a manner personal to each of us. Charles explicitly allows for this (remember he was always expecting others to arrive and join him), saying '*let each be guided by the Spirit*'. But contact with Charles, through his writings, may well give us a new insight into the real meaning of praying. Each time I reread him, I feel this renewal in myself.

As Charles' approach to prayer is simple, so are the means that he employs. Firstly the gospel: '*Find the time to read a few lines of the holy gospel each day.. for a certain time (it should not be too long).. meditate for a few moments on what you find.. You should try to soak yourself in the spirit of Jesus by reading and rereading, meditating and rereading the words and examples of Jesus. It should be like the drop of water falling steadily on the same stone in*

the same place..' (to Massignon, 1914). Secondly the Eucharist: '*The Eucharist is Jesus*', Jesus present, Jesus our food, Jesus our sacrifice. An outward 'bodily' sign which Charles found to be '*an extreme delight, a great support and strength*..' (to Marie de Bondy 1914), but which he was ready to give up, if need be, in favour of the reality signified, Jesus himself as always present (he had just received permission to reserve the Sacrament after a long interval). Thirdly, daily life and events: '*Be sure that God will give you what is best for his glory, best for your soul, best for the souls of others*..' (to Massignon 1916 1st December). Events, and especially people, are occasions for receiving the coming of Jesus, and for responding in living faith and the Spirit's love..

These great 'means' or 'moments' are basically unchanging and always valid. But the little methods of praying are, for Charles, purely relative, and vary as needed, to suit the variety of situations and the changing spiritual psychology. Always simple, they become as Charles goes forward, simpler still. Always, too, there is a combination of vocal prayers - psalms, rosary, exclamations - with meditation, mainly on the gospel, and with contemplation - simple loving attention to Jesus present. This last, contemplation, is for Charles, prayer in the full sense, the 'end' to which we are aiming. But he readily acknowledges that vocal prayer and gospel meditation are the normal supports of contemplation, and the preparation for it. This approach is at once practical, starting from where we are, and goes to the heart of real prayer in all its depths.

'*We should let ourselves be guided by the Holy Spirit*' (on John 14, 28-33; see OS 159). How to pray? How to act? In both cases the Holy Spirit is our one guide (on Mark 13,2; see OS 155-157). Not only does he 'inspire' our praying, giving it life and aim, but he guides us to pray in this or that way, at this or that moment of our lives. Charles is convinced of this, and constantly returns to this theme. '*To hear well the voice of the divine Spirit, the help of a wise director is good*'.

Notice the role attributed to the 'director': simply to help a person listen better to the Spirit's voice. For as Charles adds, *'It is for God himself to form for each our interior life, and not for us nor for other creatures: Father into your hands I commend my spirit'*. This understanding makes Charles totally free: free in adapting and changing his own concrete way of praying, free also in envisaging whatever form of praying is most appropriate to this or that person at this or that moment. Free finally to have or not to have the help of a director according to availability. Charles had the 'good fortune' to have the Abbé Henri Huvelin as his spiritual guide, a priest supremely conscious of the unique 'work' of the Holy Spirit.

As love, for Charles, is the heart of prayer, so too love is the heart of action. *'The first and last effects of love... are imitation and contemplation'* (Nazareth OS204). Why? Because *'love leads to union*', union with the Beloved. So *'let us imitate Jesus out of love, contemplate Jesus out of love, act in everything out of love for Jesus'*. The tendency to see prayer and life, or faith and life, as in any way separate, is totally foreign to Brother Charles. As he rightly sees, love, 'divine love', is the key; for love, if genuine, 'informs' every other act, and unites all together.

Of course, Charles is, and increasingly, well aware that we don't love as we wish to love. As he writes to his cousin on the day of his death: *'We find that we don't love enough; yes, it's true, we'll never love enough. But the good Lord knows from what clay he has formed us, and He loves us more than a mother can love her child. And He who doesn't lie, has told us that he will not reject anyone who comes to Him'*.

The more, in fact, Charles advances in life and faith, the more his prayer simplifies. This is due to an increasing dependence on God: the image of God as 'mother' is frequent: and this leads to a complete naturalness and simplicity.

SOME QUOTATIONS

A From the Bible:

Mark 14,36 'Abba Father'. 1 Thessalonians 5,17 Pray continually..

B From Vatican II:

Evangelica Testificatio: The discovery of intimacy with God .. shows the fruitfulness of prayer (43).

C From Brother Charles:

'Our Tender Saviour': this gospel-portrait of Jesus, made at Nazareth, was continually re-used by Charles. The section on Prayer (Contemplation), two and a half pages of gospel quotes, begins: Watch and pray at all times, Watch and pray with me, ... and ends: My Father, I abandon my soul into your hands.

Retreat at Nazareth: 'My Lord Jesus... to pray is to look at You.. to respond to Your Love.. Teach me to pray. Prayer is the familiar converse of the soul with God; it's just that; it doesn't include meditation properly speaking, nor vocal prayers, but it goes with both of these in varying degrees.. 'Look at Me while praying, look at me always.'

Retreat at Ephrem: 'Prayer is simply converse with God. So it should be something absolutely natural, absolutely true, the expression of what is deepest in your heart.. It's the state of soul which looks at God, wholly taken up in contemplating Him, saying that you love Him, by your looks, while being silent in words, and even in thought.. The best prayer is that where there's most love.. It would be good to contemplate Me continually, never to lose sight of Me; but this isn't possible for ordinary mortals here on earth.. What you can and should do is this: while busied with other occupations, lift the eyes of your soul towards Me, as often and as lovingly as you can; and, while doing your work, keep the

thought of Me as present to your spirit as the type of work you are engaged in allows.. In that way, you'll pray to Me 'continually', as far as possible for poor mortals! Prayer, you see, is above all thinking of Me while loving Me; the more you love the better you pray. Prayer is the attention of the soul lovingly fixed on me'.

Notes, 1900: 'Your prayer - First method: 1. What have You to say to me, my God? 2. This is what I have to say to You. 3. Don't speak anymore, look at the Beloved.'

Retreat, 1902, Beni-Abbes: 'Share, normally, my prayer time in two parts: during one part (at least equal to the other) contemplate, and, if need be meditate; during the other, pray for people, for everyone without exception, and for those whom I've a special responsibility for.'

Retreat 1905, Ghardaia: (while travelling) 'Make a spiritual communion each time I enter the chapel, speak with someone, write to somebody.. While going from place to place, pray the Hail Mary for the universal reign of Jesus' Heart (I frequently haven't done this, as I'd resolved)'. .

'Mother, you carried Jesus so well, teach us to carry Him, when we receive Him in communion, and always.' (reflection on the Visitation, often repeated).

Easter 1912, Tamanrasset, letter to Louis Massignon: 'Rejoice.. our Beloved is happy, be happy in His happiness.. Don't fall back into the mud that we are: we have to ask pardon each day, and suffer for our infidelity and little love.., but we shouldn't always be looking at ourselves.. love looks at what it loves, love regards continually the Beloved, with eyes fixed on Him, contemplating Him always'..

Going to the DESERT

Charles never felt the call to be a hermit in the desert, as he is often presented. On the contrary, he wishes to be with people, as Jesus at Nazareth, and to found a group of brothers, and also of sisters, a fraternity. *'My vocation is Nazareth', 'I must do all I can for the fraternity'*. This is what he continually repeats. He went to the Sahara to be with *'the most abandoned'*, those whom he saw as socially deprived and far from the true faith. But, there is no doubt, he did feel a strong attachment to the desert, to its austere beauty and to its religious symbolism.

The beauty of the desert is, obviously, not that of a garden, with its mass of colours and well-ordered shapes. Its beauty lies, rather, in what it lacks: its absence of living things, its colourless colours, its disorder. And its positive qualities are those that mark, for us at least, a rupture: extremes of temperature, violent sand-storms, rare but sudden bursts of drenching rain that endanger life. Perhaps by reaction to his past life of over-indulgence, Charles has a natural attraction to the bareness of the desert. Its austerity healed his spirit. There was, too, the challenge of conquest, each journey a victory over odds.

But even before his conversion, Charles had felt 'the pull' towards something 'more' that passes through the desert, and that his fellow-soldiers experienced, whether believing or not. Of course, God is omnipresent, but we are not always present to Him! The desert can, and often does, remove many obstacles. Distractions are removed, attention is concentrated, and so an emptiness is created, which can, grace aiding, become an expectant and welcoming emptiness, a

space for God. This vague feeling, which Charles like others experienced, became, when he returned to the Sahara filled with Jesus, a positive desire to enter more into the depths of God. The physical deprivation and solitude of the desert were welcomed as both symbol and means for loving union with his God.

As always, Charles referred to the example of Jesus. Had he not spent 'forty days' in the desert, as the Israelites, as Moses, as Elijah did? And did he not go off apart, to pray in desert places, alone with his Father? Charles is clear that the desert-life was not that of Jesus, as it was for John the Baptist, or, we could add, for the Qumran community. But, as Charles loves to insist, Jesus did regularly and frequently retire to desert-like places, as though to renew and prolong the intimacy and strength of his original 'forty days'.

A closer examination of Charles' meditations on the meaning and value of the desert show, I think, that, if we analyse, we can find three elements. The physical desert is the symbol of, and the summons to the 'desert' of solitude; and the 'desert' of solitude in turn is the symbol of, and summons to the 'desert' of the heart with God. More simply, the concrete experience of living and travelling in the 'real' desert of stone and sand tends, of itself, to free the heart from false and multifarious attachments, and so the heart, thus freed, and as it were 'alone', is open to respond to the calling of God who 'speaks' to the heart that is 'pure', that is, free and given over to His presence. God thus uses nature and grace to lead the soul of His bride back to Himself, by the 'bonds' of tender-love, healing, enlightening, uniting.

Does such a desert experience remove us from people and their problems? No, it rids us of prejudice, and opens new ways.

SOME QUOTATIONS

A From the Bible:

Hosea 2,16: But look, I am going to seduce her and lead her into the desert and speak to her heart.

Mark 1,12: At once the Spirit drove him into the desert..

Revelation 12,6: The woman escaped into the desert..

B From Vatican II:

Lumen Gentium 46: Christ in contemplation on the mountain..

Lumen Gentium passim: The Church as the pilgrim people of God..

C From Brother Charles:

Letter to Père Jerome (Trappist), 1898: *'We have to pass by the desert, and to stay there, to receive the grace of God. It's there we become empty, chasing away all that is not God, and emptying completely this little house of our souls, so as to leave all the place to God alone... It's indispensable... It's a time of grace... If we want to bear fruit, we must pass along this way...*

Yes, we need this silence, this recollection, this putting aside of everything created. That's how God builds his Kingdom in us, and forms our 'interior man': our intimate life with God, our conversion with God in faith, hope and charity...

Later our soul will produce fruit, much fruit, but exactly to the degree in which our 'inner man' is formed... You can only give what you've got; and it's in solitude, in this life 'alone with God alone'.. that God gives Himself fully to the one who gives their all to Him...

Don't be afraid of being unfaithful to your duties to people: on the contrary, it's the only way to serve them effectively: look at St Paul, St Benedict, St Patrick and so many others... Look higher still, at John the Baptist, look at our Lord.

Now, while you're preparing for your priestly ordination, be occupied - as holy obedience allows - with Him alone.. Later on God will ask you other things...'

Meditation on Mark 6, 30-32: 'Come apart, in a desert place, and rest'. 'In our life, whether 'hidden' or 'public', but especially if we are involved in much ministry, we should have times of rest, times of solitude, moments spent just in Jesus' company... These 'retreats' should have the three characteristics indicated by Jesus here. There should be rest: nothing tiring or forced, nothing painful for the spirit, but times of calm and peace, so that we finish up.. reposed and refreshed, having rested pleasantly at the feet of Jesus... Then, there should be solitude. The more we can be alone with Jesus, the more we shall 'taste' His presence, for love enjoys the intimacy of a 'tête-à-tête'. All our thoughts, all our heart should be occupied just with the love and contemplation of Jesus, enjoying the company of our Beloved... So we should be there with Him: sometimes looking at Him without saying anything, sometimes asking Him questions, always enjoying His presence.'..

Retreat Notes 1901: 'I am not called to preaching (my spirit isn't capable); nor to the desert (my body can't live without eating); I am then called to the life of Nazareth (my soul and body are capable, and I have this 'attraction')'.

Notes 1898: *Whether our life be that of Nazareth, the Public Life or the Desert.. it should 'cry the Gospel'...*

The MISSION of Brother Charles

Charles' early life is, clearly, that of a person searching for, and finding faith. And his life continues to be, up till the end, a journey in faith (cf Lumen Gentium 56: Mary, precisely as model of the Church and her members, 'advanced in her pilgrimage of faith'.). Having found the Truth in the person of the one Lover, to become his 'Beloved', he continues to search for the way ahead, but now in the light of faith, a 'light' that for him - as for us - often appears as 'darkness' (cf the 'dark nights' of faith's journey according to John of the Cross, whom Charles constantly read, and advised others to read). *'Does Jesus love me?.. I feel nothing.. I have to grip hard to pure faith'*.

Converted at the age of 28, Charles, in willing acceptance of the Abbé Huvelin's 'direction' (so 'gentle and firm', so open to the Spirit), spends three full - and to him long - years in search of his personal vocation. As he later says, a vocation is 'not chosen but found', and '*once found to be embraced wholeheartedly*'. And his vocation-search is in line with his faith-discovery: total. He wants, and needs to give his 'all' for the 'All' that he has received: *'As soon I knew that God existed, I knew that I could only live for Him'* (we can recognise, again, his affinity with the 'all and nothing' of John of the Cross).

Who is this God that Charles comes to know and wishes to live for? It is not the all-powerful Creator and just Judge (the popular image of God at the time), but the God who is Presence, the God who is Love: the God whom Charles encountered in his conversion

experience, whom he later names as 'Jesus-Caritas', and whose mercies he sings in his 'retreat of Nazareth' of 1897. Charles is far from denying the total Transcendence (he had found a pointer to this among the Muslims), but this transcendent God meets him and embraces him in the heart of human experience. 'By his incarnation, the Son of God has... united himself with each and every human person' (Gaudium et Spes). It's these words of the Council that are spelt out in Pope John Paul's first, programmatic, encyclical, and are continued in all the others: Jesus' redemption, God the Father's mercy, the Spirit's uplifting and healing power are present at the root of all human experience, be it personal history, family life, work, social relations and institutions. We only need faith (of which we have so little) - faith like that of Mary - to become aware of this 'presence' and to correspond to it in our actions.

Where is God present? In Nazareth... This is Charles' great discovery. Visiting the Holy Land (at Huvelin's suggestion), Charles is attracted irresistibly by Jesus' life in Nazareth, but he will only discover little by little all its meaning for himself and his followers. He chooses to enter a Trappist monastery precisely because it is, for him, a 'Nazareth': a place of poverty and manual work in 'imitation' of Jesus, a place of 'sacrifice' for Jesus. As we know, Charles left the monastery. While clearly expressing what he felt God's will to be for himself at this critical moment, he entrusted the decision totally - as was his way - into the hands of the Abbot General and his Council.

Was Charles' seven-year stay with the Trappists a case of mistaken vocation? No it was not a mistake; but it was incomplete, though only the experience itself made Charles and his community aware of this. For Charles learnt much as a Trappist: self-discipline, community life, the ways of prayer... But he failed to find the 'abjection' of Jesus: hadn't Jesus chosen 'the last place' (as he had heard the Abbé Huvelin say)?

Charles had seen something of this 'last place' when asked to visit a sick man, a poor Armenian, who lived with his family in the hills near the monastery of Akbés. It was this that drew him to go and live in Nazareth itself and to be a 'workman'. For wasn't Jesus 'God the worker of Nazareth'? In fact, Charles lived and worked as a handyman for the local convent of Poor Clares, and while doing odd jobs for the community (his manual skills, as it turned out, were limited!), he spent the greater part of his time in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, in meditation on the Gospels, and in writing copy-book after copy-book of gospel-based reflections (the majority of his writings are from this three-year period). It was like a long retreat (his contact with the village people was limited), in which he explored the meaning of Nazareth: the meaning for Jesus, for himself, and for the future 'fraternity' of Nazarene 'brothers' and 'sisters'.

From the first Charles, surprisingly, envisaged founding communities. Surprisingly, for he felt called to the 'hiddenness' of Jesus' Nazareth life; and he had absolutely no means of realising his desires. But it was only after an internal struggle that he accepted an invitation from the Mother Abbess of the Poor Clares at Jerusalem, to ask for priestly ordination, once assured that it was compatible with the 'humility' of Jesus.

Ordination, at the age of 42, is for Charles a turning point. Before, he had put all his energies into his personal relationship with Jesus. Now he thinks in terms of being Jesus for others: as his ordination notes affirm, he now wishes to '*join Jesus in his immolation for the salvation of all*', and in particular to '*offer the divine feast to the poor*'. At the same time, Nazareth becomes '*wherever is most useful to my neighbour... for those most in need... for the most abandoned*'. So at Beni-Abbes, where he celebrates the first Mass on the 30th of October (the anniversary of his conversion exactly 15 years before), just a few months after his ordination as priest on the 7th of June (on the Sunday within the then octave of Corpus Christi), we find,

soon after his arrival, the well known texts on his desire to be '*a universal brother*': a brother to others, not in a purely humanistic or secular sense, but '*as Jesus our Brother*' and '*seeing Jesus in each person*'! Soon, in fact, he was seeing up to a hundred people a day, people in every sort of need.

At the same time, there is a deepening in his relationship with Jesús: while continuing to '*look at Jesus and love him*', he feels called to enter more deeply into Jesus' prayer to His Father. Human brotherhood and God's Fatherhood find, for Charles, their centre in Jesus.

Living at Tamanrasset, Charles goes further in both directions, towards God and towards people. Sharing more closely in the life and hardships of the Touareg people, learning both to give and, for him more difficult, to receive, entering into the culture and aspirations, offering and receiving advice, Charles is able to see the 'other' as an 'equal' and a 'friend', and is seen by those 'others' as 'one of us'. And it is as 'one of them' that Charles 'offers his life' for them, an offering completed and accepted in that freely-willed martyrdom that he has long desired: '*Know you'll die... a martyr, and hope it will be today*'.

Two symbols mark his death: his body and his monstrance were 'accidentally' thrown together on the sand, the Host still present and untouched: and it was a First Friday in Advent. Charles' recognition of the Lord's love and his own answering love were full of Advent expectation...

RECOGNISING PERSONS as brothers/sisters and friends

Charles wishes, as we know, to be '*a universal brother*', meaning '*a brother to each and all*'. Put more fully, we can say that Charles desires to see each person as a brother or sister, to act towards each person as with a friend, and to work together with everyone for social solidarity and an ultimate common destiny. It's a limitless ambition, typical of Charles!

To see myself and another person in a brother/sister relationship, is to recognise that other as an equal: as equal in dignity and worth as myself. When we are similar, and in so far as we are similar, this is, maybe, not too difficult. It was the case, for example, between Charles and the French officers. But when there are wide differences of class and natural capacities, as between Charles and most of the French soldiers, or wide differences of culture, religion and civil status, as between Charles and the various groups of persons in Algeria, then as we have ourselves experienced, it's far from easy to recognise and acknowledge the 'other' as a brother or sister.

'Our people (the French colonists in Algeria) won't mix with the people here (the people of Algeria); they know little or nothing of them, look down upon them, and aim only to profit from them' (from a letter of 1906). Charles soon became aware of this condescending attitude on the part of many of his compatriots. Later he came to realise that this attitude was reciprocated: *'The Touaregs regard us as infidels and barbarians'*. In fact, as he remarked, the majority of the French in Algeria, whether soldiers, traders or administrators, were non-believers, acted out of self-interest, and mistreated the local people. It's in this situation that

Charles boldly proclaims: '*We must make them our equals... if not, they will reject us, and throw us into the sea*' (a prophetic utterance).

For Charles, this 'seeing the other as an equal', as a 'brother or sister', is both an act of natural justice, giving the other that respect which is due, and is assumed into that 'faith-seeing' of one's neighbour as equally 'an image of God, redeemed like us by Christ', whether the neighbour be of this or that religion or none. Was this just a matter of words? Not at all: Charles was passionately concerned for the slaves in the oases. Soon after arriving in Beni-Abbes, he protests to the civil authorities, he argues with his Bishop, he writes to friends in France to exercise their influence, he buys slaves and has three young ones living with him, and he constantly shows his respect by conversing freely with them and treating them as equals. As he often says, '*Acts speak louder than words*'.

It's something to recognise another as a brother or sister; it's more to welcome them as a friend. Friendship supposes respect, the recognition of the other's existence as an equal; but, building on this, friendship wishes all possible good to the friend, and hopes to form a lasting and mutual relationship, which will be a sharing in this commonly desired good. Of course, this is not possible with the modern more limited notion of friendship as something emotionally experienced and freely chosen. This only allows of a few friends, and maybe not for the best of purposes. Charles, on the contrary, wishes to act towards each and every person as to a friend: his intention is all inclusive, all embracing, going beyond all barriers of natural sympathy and affinity. Is this a hopelessly excessive ambition? Yes, if we look at it in a purely human way; no, if, as Charles, we try to act '*as Jesus did*' and '*with Jesus present among us*'.

Charles, clearly, had a gift for forming friendships. We can see it in his extensive correspondence: regular and lasting exchanges of letters with such people as the Abbé Huvelin, Henri de Castries, an

army officer, Brother Jerome, a Trappist, Susanne Perrette, a kindred spirit, Marie de Bondy, his cousin, and so many others. But these were persons of broadly similar culture and background. What is perhaps more significant is his many friendships with the Touareg people, friendships inscribed in the ordinary exchanges of daily life, and reaching out over wide cultural and religious differences.

It's worth noting, too, that Charles' vast ambition of universal friendship was always rooted in the simplest acts of shared living: smiling to visitors (something remembered long after his death by many persons), giving time for chatting (sometimes hours of precious time), helping when needed and being ready to receive help in one's own need (Charles, with his temperament, took some years to learn this), showing interest and giving information on customs and traditions (Charles' study of Touareg culture in all its aspects is well known, but he was equally ready to inform his hearers about French ways, not to impose them but to share). He allowed the higher reaches of friendship to build on the ordinary acts of human intercourse: we could call it the 'Nazarene' approach.

'We all have a common destiny': so said Charles to his Touareg friends. It was an unusual attitude at the time, but has been explicitly confirmed by Vatican II (*Gaudium et Spes* 22). For Charles, brotherhood, friendship and walking together towards a common destiny are like a single three-fold cord: brothers and friends can only have a common purpose. This purpose is on three levels: that of social life in community, seeking the common good, and that of our ultimate destiny in God, whose beginning is in the here-and-now of our ordinary every-day life. So we find Charles interested and concerned for everything, whether small or important, that makes up people's daily life and helps to improve it. For example, he asks his sister to send knitting needles for the Touareg ladies, and himself teaches them to knit. He also requests hair-dye for them, knowing

how much they appreciate its use. To Moussa, the young chief, he offers his advice, as a friend, and passes on Moussa's wishes to the French authorities. He discusses also the advantages and risks of technical progress (the possibility of a Trans-Saharan railway for example), and of cultural changes (such as the advantages of learning well the French language). Above all, Charles shows a passionate concern for the Touareg language and culture, spending many hours, day and night, to record exactly and in minute detail, the words, the poetry, the customs and the traditions of the Touareg people. The sheer volume and precision of his work is astonishing: a true mark of realistic love.

'May all of us go to heaven'... Charles' prayer is for the brothers and friends with whom he has identified himself, for each and all, and on this Nazareth foundation, for all persons in all places. As always, Charles is, in this, imitating, as best he can, the way of Jesus. Identified with a particular people, his prayer for them is inseparable from his life with them; and this life with them culminates in the offering of that life for them, first in the living out of each day, and, then finally, in the complete self-offering of freely accepting death. And, again, with Jesus, Charles wishes to offer his life for all; for *'Jesus means 'Saviour', and he died for all'*.

All Charles' efforts, particularly in his last years, are directed to express his share in Jesus' love and redemptive 'work' for each person in their daily, concrete life.

NAZARETH for Jesus and for us

'*My vocation is Nazareth*', that is how Brother Charles sums up his vocation: his personal vocation, and that of all those he believes will be called to follow the same path.

Forgotten Nazareth! Even by the time the written Gospels were published, the Nazareth life of Jesus is largely passed over in silence, or, if mentioned by the way, depreciated: 'Can any good come from Nazareth?' (John 1,46; cf Mark 6,3). For the followers of the Risen Jesus, Nazareth, it seems, was no longer 'newsworthy': nothing, apparently, happened.

In fact, this very 'non-newsworthiness' of Nazareth is, I feel, the key to its meaning: God, in the Incarnation, assumed our ordinary everyday life, the life and work of a village family. And such a life is uneventful. It's made up of the simple, daily routine: prayer, work, meeting neighbours, prayer, eating, sleep, with the equally regular sabbath worship and rest. The only event would be the annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem (cf Luke 2,41). It was precisely this hard, monotonous life, the ordinary life of the ordinary person, that Jesus chose. And this ordinary, working life has changed little, in essentials, throughout the ages. It was, and is, the daily life of the large majority of people.

In the 3rd century Origen, himself a great scholar, struck by the wisdom of Jesus' teaching, doubted that Jesus was really a workman. He was the 'son of a carpenter' (as Matthew records), but he wasn't himself a carpenter (as Mark seems to say - Mark 6,3). Origen's hesitation was partly linked to a disputed manuscript reading in the

Greek text; but, probably, Origen's feeling that being a simple 'workman' was unfitting for the Son of God, tipped the scales. In any case, this same 'feeling' seems to have continued in the Church for many centuries. The 19th century, in the midst of which Charles was born (1858), saw a certain rediscovery of Nazareth. But it was limited to the need for acquiring the basic virtues of domestic and civic life: 'obedience', for example (Cf Luke 2,51).

Charles' discovery of Nazareth is, then, something new: new at that time, and, apart from a few traces in the early period, new in the whole history of the Church. How did Charles come to know of Nazareth? He first went there, without much initial enthusiasm, on the recommendation of the Abbé Huvelin, who had suggested to him a visit to the Holy Land, as part of his search for his vocation. Once there, an 'attraction' for the place immediately took hold of Charles. What exactly did this attraction consist in? Not in the meagre physical remains, but, as he later put it, in the discovery of '**God the workman of Nazareth**'. It was like a seed, once implanted, that grew and developed, and came to dominate his whole life.

This seed-attraction grew, at times imperceptibly, at times suddenly. The Trappist life called him, at first, as being that of 'Nazareth': prayer, manual labour, community, poverty - '*as the Holy Family*'. Prayer will remain a key part of Nazareth for Charles, in line with Jesus' reply to his parents, 'I must be in my Father's house' or ... 'about my Father's business' (Luke 2,49). But experience, and a small but striking event, showed Charles that Trappist life was not, at least for him, Jesus' Nazareth. He visited the nearby home of a poor Armenian farm labourer, living with his wife and children, and Charles realised that their life was much closer to his ideal. Social poverty was different from the austerity (and they were austere) of the Trappists.

So Charles felt impelled to ask to leave the Trappists, to follow his 'true vocation': to live Nazareth. For himself alone? No! Already he

felt called to found a community of both brothers and sisters. And already he wrote, in detail, a 'rule' for each of them, the same rule. Given that he had so far achieved nothing of his personal vocation, there is, surely, a 'sign' here of his founding 'charism'.

His first step is to go to Nazareth itself - Charles' spirituality is always down-to-earth. There he is offered work with the community of the Poor Clares, as a handyman. As it turns out, he is not so handy! Asked to repair a wall, it's crooked and uneven. Asked, then, to repair a table, it's lop-sided. After this, he's only asked to act as sacristan, and to do some shopping in the village (to the amusement and mockery of the local children), though he does show a talent for drawing (drawings of the convent, pious cards, sketches - some of which survive). What, then, does Charles do? In the main, he spends long moments of prayer: prayer before Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, meditation on the life of Jesus in the gospels, communion with Jesus both in the Mass and in all his simple daily occupations (occupations which he likens to those of Jesus, Mary and Joseph in Nazareth). Charles, we should note, is living in a garden-shed, eating little and sleeping little, and with few contacts with people around.

What is his motivation? It's the desire to 'go down', to be *'like Jesus at Nazareth'*. For Charles sees the Incarnation as a mystery of 'descent', of which Nazareth is the concrete expression, but which covers the whole of Jesus' life, from conception to death (cf the hymn in Philippians, chapter 2). There is a reaction (probably unconscious) against the popular image of Jesus as a human King enlarged: one who 'dominates' ('Be not like that', says Jesus - Mark 10, 42-43). No: Jesus, for Charles, as he'd learnt from the Abbé Huvelin, is the one *'who took the last place'*, and who was 'jealous' of this 'privilege'. We have here a spiritual revolution, which is, hopefully, slowly growing in the Church.

While living in Nazareth, Charles comes to grasp something of the inner life of the Holy Family. But it's only after his return to Algeria, now ordained a priest, that the concrete expression of this Nazareth life begins to appear. Nazareth becomes 'for people'. As we've seen, it's in Beni-Abbes that Charles, while continuing to devote long hours to prayer when free to do so (early morning and late evening), gives himself unstintingly to each and every person who comes to visit him (up to a hundred persons a day).

And later, in Tamanrasset, he becomes, quite simply 'one of them'. A Christian, of course; a monk living for God alone, certainly; but now identified fully with the Touareg people. For Charles is always open to the Spirit: that Spirit who is 'the one thing necessary', who is 'our daily bread', the one whom Charles continually invokes, four times a day, morning, noon, evening and midnight, for himself, for all the members of the Church, for everyone without exception.

What does this development indicate? It's, basically, a growing sense that Jesus, God incarnate, shared our life, our ordinary life in all its ordinariness, especially the ordinary life of the socially poor. Nazareth, for Charles, is not just the preparation for the striking acts of the 'public ministry', but is the life of love of God and neighbour, which the public ministry will express in words and miraculous acts. Jesus then teaches what He had first learnt and lived, as the public herald of that Kingdom which he had embodied in Nazareth. And finally, he offers on the Cross what he had lived and shared as 'one of us' (cf Hebrews, chapters 2 and 5).

Praying as CONTACT WITH PEOPLE

'May Jesus enlighten you, may He give you his Spirit, may He enable you to be and to do, at each moment, what's most pleasing to Him; in a word 'let Him live in you'... I ask Him this for you, for everyone. Let's ask together, for every human being, what we ask for ourselves'. So wrote Charles to his friend Louis Massignon (Tamanrasset, 31 July 1909).

Charles was a great intercessor. As always, he refers to the example and recommendation of Jesus. Jesus prayed for Himself (in Gethsemane, Mark 14,36), for Peter and for Lazarus (Luke 22,32 and John 11,41), and for all believers and all people without exception (John 17,20 and Matthew 5,45). We too, then, should pray for ourselves, for particular persons and peoples, and for everyone everywhere. In a meditation on the 'our Father', he writes: *'I ask nothing for myself alone, all that I ask for in the Pater I ask for God or for all human beings'*. This meditation was written on the evening of January 23rd, 1897, a day of great personal importance to Charles, for it was the day when his Trappist superiors released him from the Order and authorised him to follow his personal Nazareth vocation. Yet, on this day so full of personal rejoicing, Charles immediately extends his thoughts and wishes from the 'me-and-my-Father' relationship to the 'us-and-our-Father' relationship, a relationship which embraces each and everyone, and which requires an appropriate attitude and action on our part, namely, that of a 'tender brother'. In other words, genuine prayer, 'with Jesus and in Jesus' supposes a moral identification of 'I' and 'we'; so that each one of us is attentive to, concerned for, and ready to act in favour of each and every other one in the light and strength, not of limited

human considerations and abilities (frequently self-seeking and always limited), but of the Father's infinite love and care.

So, in this spirit, Charles prays for the concrete needs of the people he is with, but also, and especially, that *'everyone may go to heaven'*. Such intercessory prayer, for Charles, is rooted in a **shared life**, and would, for him, be largely meaningless without this realistic sharing. It was as a missioned and accepted member of the Touareg community that Charles prayed with them and for them: precisely as **'one of them'**. And it was as a member of this necessarily limited human community that Charles was authentically inserted into the total human community, and so could pray, with each and all, for each and all. For it was as **'one of us'**, as **'our Brother'** who shared our life and experience, that Jesus interceded, and intercedes for us (Hebrews 2,10-18 and 5,7-10). And this sharing was lived out in Nazareth (Matthew 2,23).

But sharing of life, while needed, is not enough. All intercession must be rooted in Jesus' redemptive work, which was the culmination of the life he shared with us. And as for Jesus, so for us: to intercede is, ultimately, to participate in Jesus' self-offering. 'He offered himself'; this is Jesus' final act, but it sums up the whole of his life, of his life shared with us and, as such, interceding for us. Charles links Nazareth and the Cross, as parts of one total self-offering; similarly he links our daily life and the Eucharist. Our Eucharist must express our life, our personal life which we share with our companions and in which we pray for ourselves and for each other. We must unite this shared life with the life of Jesus, life offered in redemption, offered to the Father, offered for all.

This approach to intercessory prayer comes, for Charles, from his constant meditation on the life of Jesus in the gospels. But we can find a firm foundation for it in the biblical concept of Covenant. The gift of the Covenant bonds inseparably God with His people. And

this Covenant, with its different historical moments, finds its complete and final expression in the life of Jesus, in turn completed by his Paschal mystery, which founds the 'new and eternal covenant'. In this Covenant, the 'poor', humanly speaking the last and the least, have a privileged place: their 'cry' is the first to be heard. Again, the final act of Jesus, his handing over of himself to the Father, is an act which is both to the Father (ad Patrem) and for us (pro nobis), as two dimensions of one and the same act. And this final act, combining prayer and action (suffering freely accepted), is the ultimate step in a life marked by the same attitude. We can say, I think, that all Jesus' actions, during his 'public life', are aimed at growing in communion with his Father and at re-integrating people into this communion with their God and with one another. But this aim, towards God and towards people, while having two objects - God and each person - is a single aim. For in the Covenant relationship, God and his people are one. So the new law of love is one: the one love of God received in our hearts, and expressing itself in love for God and neighbour. And this same attitude was developing in Jesus during his childhood: 'he grew in grace with God and man' (Luke 2,52). As an adult in Nazareth, he was both impelled by the need 'to be about his Father's business' (Luke 2,49), and the need to return to the ordinary life of his native village with his parents (Luke 2,51). The Heart of Jesus, in which this one Covenant love is fully expressed, is for Charles a powerful symbol which sums up the fundamental attitude of Jesus, and which draws Charles to try to share this same attitude. We can, by the way, note that this attraction, focussing on Jesus' Heart, is not for Charles, a 'devotion', with its practices and promises, but a sign of what is most basic in Jesus' life on earth and in His living presence.

But what Jesus did as one of us needs to be integrated into our own being and living, in accordance with our own inner growth and changing external circumstances. This is precisely the work of the Holy Spirit, who communicates to us Jesus' life and attitudes, His way of praying and acting, and above all His way of loving God and

neighbour, each and every one in a personal and appropriate manner. Charles is constantly invoking the Spirit as guide of his prayer and life, and inviting his friends - and hoped-for followers - to do the same. *'Let's be guided by the Holy Spirit... that's our Guide, our only Guide'* (Oeuvres Spirituelles 159, where it's said that the role of a 'director' is simply that of helping us *'hear the Spirit's voice'*). Here specifically, the Little Brothers and Sisters (1899 and 1902), and later all the members of the Jesus-Caritas Union (1909), are asked to pray the Veni Creator at 'the three principal hours of the day' to beg *'the heavenly Father to pour out on all human beings, created by Him, His Holy Spirit, our 'daily bread' and the 'one thing necessary'; the Brothers and Sisters should put all their heart into this prayer, praying for all people without exception'* (Directory, article II, quoted in OS 477 - cf Constitutions OS 422).

In a word, Charles' prayer is always not just for himself and his needs, but 'for each and every person'. For his motif and model is the all-embracing love of the Heart of Jesus (It. Sp. 231).

Jesus the SAVIOUR

'He was named 'Jesus'. He wanted His name to express His work, the work of His life. ... If we want to imitate Him, the first thing to do is to make the salvation of souls the work of our life...' (Note 13 June 1916; see Itinéraire Spirituelle, J-F Six, 359; cf Nouveaux Ecrits Spirituelles, Gospel Meditations, 56-91, with the note I, 1897-1899). From his conversion till his death, this is the dominant theme in Brother Charles' life: if Jesus was, above all, the Saviour, then Charles wished to do the same. Not, of course, by his own efforts, but by allowing Jesus to live in him and to continue his work through him. Let's look at this aspiration of Charles in more detail.

Firstly, Jesus is the Saviour of all: this is Charles' basic conviction. But it took him time, and an openness to 'signs of the times' in his experience, to get beyond the commonly accepted view that 'non-believers' (infidèles) were not saved as a general rule, with the exception of special acts of God's mercy. In Tamanrasset particularly, Charles becomes increasingly aware of the good in those around him, a good that while personal is clearly linked to their culture and religion, to their Touareg culture and Islamic religion. In fact, while impatient of all that is false and degrading, whether among those of his own faith or that of his hosts, and while proclaiming, without compromise, Jesus and his Gospel in his life, Charles shows a total respect for the faith, or its secular equivalent, of all those he meets, provided only it be sincere. So, for example, he tells Dr. Herisson, a Protestant by origin but little practising, that *'God, I feel sure, will accept all persons of genuine goodwill, be they Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Mohammedan or pagan'* (conversation on the night of Christmas, 1909). Similarly, Charles asks his cousin,

Marie de Bondy, to send some *'plain rosaries, made of wood and without a cross.. They are for Muslims; I teach them to pray, saying 'My God, I love you' on the small beads, and 'My God, I love you with all my heart' on the large ones'*. Again, at the request of his friend Moussa, the local chief, he went to assist his aunt Tihit on her death bed, knowing well that both Moussa and his aunt were convinced and practising Muslims and that he was recognised and accepted as a 'Christian marabout' (holy man). In fact, paradoxically, Charles became a kind of 'chaplain' to the local Muslim community. For he is convinced, as his acts show, that God's grace is at work in the hearts of all, of everyone without exception, as Vatican II has explicitly declared (*Gaudium et Spes*, 22). So, sure of being heard, he constantly prays, *'May everyone go to Heaven'*. And this leads to a reciprocal attitude on the part of his Muslim friends: writing to his sister, just after his death, Moussa concludes: 'Charles the marabout has died not only for all of you, he has died for us too. May God have mercy on him, and may we meet in Paradise'.

Secondly, Jesus, the Saviour of all, is Saviour by all of his life. *'From My conception and birth I am your Saviour, and the work of salvation is my one aim'* (meditation, 1901). This view of Jesus' life, while always present, becomes Charles' dominant theme following his priestly ordination. At the end of his ordination retreat, he writes: *'I am called to 'follow', to imitate Jesus, the Saviour, the Good Shepherd, who came 'to bring fire on earth' and 'to save what is lost'*. Each part of Jesus' total life-span is seen as a part of his one saving 'work'. And each part brings its own particular contribution. Charles insists especially on the role of Nazareth: the 'work' of Nazareth, Jesus' daily labour with all its Godward and human components, is already an expression of the 'work' of Salvation completed on the Cross and in the Resurrection. This view, elaborated by Pope John Paul in *Laborem Exercens* (110-131), gives a new depth to our ordinary work-a-day life. Jesus' public ministry is also seen in terms of 'work', thus referring back to Nazareth and

forward to the final acceptance of rejection, suffering and death, not as such, but 'into the hands of the Father', who is life and giver of life.

Thirdly, Jesus the Saviour calls us, his followers, to join Him in His saving work. Charles, of course, is conscious of receiving the gift of salvation (for example, in the long meditation on his conversion experience, at Nazareth in 1897), but he feels an increasing urge to share in this 'work', for the benefit of those to whom he is sent. *'If we want to imitate Him, as we should, let's make His work (of saving people) our work'*. With the out-going thrust of his life, after ordination and his consequent mission to Beni-Abbes and later to Tamanrasset, this becomes Charles' one desire, both for himself and for the members of the Association (from 1909 onwards) to which he devoted much of his last years. So, in the Association handbook, he says: *'We need Priscillas and Aquilas (lay apostles)... Let them make the salvation of people the work of their lives, like Jesus'*. How? *'by the priesthood of the faithful, let them offer themselves and Jesus for all His intentions (those of the 'Our Father')..., and let them mix with those around them, using with each the most suitable means, with one a word, with another silence, with all example, goodness, brotherly affection...'* In a word, Charles sees himself, and his hoped-for followers, as called to be *'saviours with Jesus'*, an expression used later, but which clearly sums up his purpose. Their model is Mary, who, as soon as she receives Jesus, is urged to go and share in His saving work. This is how Charles understands the Visitation: *'I came into the world to save it... and as soon as I am born, I push my Mother to work at this with Me'* (1898). And he adds: *'I ask all to whom I give Myself to do the same'*.

The message of salvation is, of course, at the heart of Christianity, but Charles' insistence on the need for Christians to share in Jesus' saving work is something new. Implicit from the beginning (in the 'follow me' of the gospels and in St Paul's conception of the mystical body, taken up in Lumen Gentium 7), it has only recently emerged

in Christian consciousness. In fact, if Christian love is a sharing in Christ's love, then our love, like His, must be a saving love, redemptive by its very nature. Charles came to realise this, probably, through his realistic devotion to the Heart of Jesus, and his constant insistence on imitation as the mark of the true disciple. An imitation, we can add, which is not only of internal attitudes, but also of living out these attitudes in the ordinary Nazareth texture of our daily life and human relationships.

Such cooperation in salvation begins in the small sphere of our concrete life and activities. Otherwise it would be unreal. But, from the incarnated foundation, it needs to extend, like Jesus' love, to all: it has no limits.

MARY'S PLACE in the faith of Brother Charles

'Our Lord Jesus loves us so much... We should love Him passionately' (letter to Fr Jerome, Trappist, 1906). Charles was all through a 'Jesus-person', fascinated by Jesus, wanting to give his all to Jesus. What place, then, we can ask, does Mary, Jesus' Mother, have in his life?

Let's first look at certain seemingly providential signs in Charles' early life. He was born on the 15th September, 1858, on the feast of Our Lady's sorrows, in the year in which she appeared to Bernadette. As a child Charles, as he himself recalls, linked love of Mary with love of Jesus, in a natural and spontaneous way, and his first communion card bore the words, 'To Jesus through Mary I consecrate myself'. Later, discovering an adult faith, he was to receive communion at Our Lady's altar, a communion which he saw as a *'second first communion'*. This happened, as we know, largely as a result of the loving and welcoming 'presence' of his cousin Marie, whom he frequently called his 'mother' or 'little Mother'. For it was *'her silence, gentleness and goodness'* that, he tells us, drew him back to God, to Jesus his 'Beloved'; and it was the same Marie who continued to watch over this presence of Jesus, this growth of Jesus in Charles. Is it fanciful to see in his cousin a Mary figure: a person reproducing for Charles the role of the Virgin Mother, conceiving and supporting his faith in Jesus, and so conceiving and supporting the grace-life of Jesus in him? This is a suggestion of Father Francis Frost, and it seems to me most probable, the more so when we see its similarity with the mystery of the Visitation, which was so dear to Charles.

Let's now look at the place which Charles explicitly gives to Mary in his post-conversion faith-journey. It is Charles' fourth winter as a Trappist, the fourth too in Akbès (Syria), and he is having serious doubts about his vocation: is his desire for the life of Nazareth a sign of instability and a delusion, or God's call? In his disarray, on the advice of an old monk, he entrusts himself totally to Mary. *'I had a lot of interior difficulties, worries, fears, doubts: I wanted to serve the good Lord, but feared going against Him, and couldn't see clearly. So I entrusted myself wholeheartedly to the protection of Our Lady of perpetual succour, begging her to guide my steps as she used to guide those of the child Jesus, and to lead me in everything..'* (letter to Fr. Jerome, see J-F Six 153-4). Meditating on this same act, while in Nazareth, Charles recalls the totality of his self-entrustment to Mary and to her wishes, and indicates again that he was acting as Jesus (*I begged her to carry me as she had carried You*) and for Jesus (*I asked her to do with me what she wished for the greater glory of her Son, according to His will*).

This was not an isolated act, but, from now on, Charles regularly confides himself, his actions and 'his people' to Mary and her motherly concern. For example, concluding a retreat at Beni Abbes, he writes: *'I propose to give all my actions, prayers and sufferings to Mary, so that she may give all to Jesus'*. In Tamanrasset, he notes: *'It's two years since You've inhabited this poor chapel, in this part of Your Kingdom.. Heart of Jesus, your kingdom come.. Mother of ever-ready help, visit, convert, sanctify, save this people of yours'* (the Touaregs). We can see how Charles' intense desire to imitate Jesus, and be conformed to Him, is the underlying motivation of his attitude to Mary. We can also notice that this motivation is activated through Charles' personal experiences and the hidden work of the Spirit, whom he constantly invoked.

When in Nazareth, as a domestic to the Poor Clares, it's normal, given Charles' attraction for Jesus' Nazareth life, that he should

consider the concrete life of the Holy Family: *'I'm in the house of Nazareth, between Mary and Joseph, like a little brother close to his elder brother Jesus'*. Such language could be a form of sentimental dreaming, but for Charles it was a matter of the realism of faith. The living person of Jesus to whom he had committed his life, was inseparable from his close and long relationship with his Mother and Foster-Father. This leads Charles to enter into the everyday life of the family of Jesus. He wishes to share their life-style (food, lodging, work, prayer, routine...), their personal relationships with each other and with their neighbours (interest, concern, help given and received..), and their God-centred orientation (as seen in the gospel incidents recorded, with their external obstacles and inner conflicts, among themselves...). Charles sees their life as an 'example' for himself and for the communities he hopes to inaugurate (Constitutions 24 and 28), and, later, for all Christians, whatever their state of life, and, by extension, for all persons and family groups. In fact, the relational life of Jesus, Mary and Joseph becomes, for Charles, a model of that fraternal structure which should be at the heart of all human living and relating. It is to be noted that Charles envisages the equality of persons, relating as equals, as having precedence over the authority-dependent relations that are a necessary, but subsidiary, element of human family and social life. This is clearly implied by all the examples given: Jesus is pictured as an adult, an '*ordinary working person*', engaged like Mary and Joseph in manual work, and considering their needs and wishes, as they consider his, always with the proviso of putting God first (see Directory). Vatican II has confirmed and developed this theme (Gaudium et Spes 32 and 92).

The chapel of Beni Abbes contains a simple icon-like picture, done by Charles himself, of the Visitation. Charles sees the Visitation as expressing the mission of Mary, the mission of '*carrying Jesus*' among those who do not know Him: carrying Jesus by sharing Mary's faith and contemplation of the hidden Guest, and, while continuing to do

this without interruption, sharing the joys and pains of one's neighbour. This, of course, is an expression of neighbourly charity and affection, but it is more than this: through these simple and ordinary acts, Jesus is present, and, true to His name, is exercising his saving activity. Mary is silent, but her presence and action make Jesus present and active. This is the 'mission' to which Charles feels called, and with which he identifies. It is a mission to make Jesus present, in silence, and to share in His redemptive work. It applies to the whole cooperation of Mary in Jesus' unique 'work', as this dynamically develops throughout the various events of their lives. Charles' intense urge to share in Jesus' great work of salvation, for each and all, is rooted in his sense of being asked to identify with Mary's 'mission' of '*carrying Jesus*'. We can see here, I think, clear recalling of the providential date of his birth, the 'memory' of Mary's sorrows associated with the life-giving death of Jesus, and of the human presence of his cousin Marie, who in silence carried Jesus to him and nurtured his faith in the indwelling Jesus whom he, in turn, was called to carry... We can see, too, the dynamic of Nazareth, in which the everyday work and relationships of our life become the beginning of the supreme 'work' and new 'relationships' of that one Sacrifice in which everything is summed up, and to which we join ourselves in the Eucharist, for 'those dear to us' and 'for all'.

JESUS CARITAS as the summary of Charles' life

'Our religion is all love, its sign a Heart'. So wrote Charles to Henri Duveyrier, a fellow geographer and friend but a non-believer. This was soon after his entry as a Trappist, and so not so long after his own rediscovery of faith. It was part of his answer to his friend's question, 'Why ever did you become a Trappist?'. Charles replied, *'Out of love, only out of love'.*

Charles adopted JESUS  CARITAS as his motto in April, 1900, when planning to found the congregation of the Hermits of the Sacred Heart and to become himself the first hermit on the Mount of the Beatitudes. Later he will change this to the Little Brothers of the Sacred Heart, and dedicate the first fraternity of Beni-Abbes under this title. Further, all his letters and personal notes will carry this motto, JESUS  CARITAS, with the heart in the centre. Today, with our different sensibility in the matter of all that concerns 'devotions', we need to ask ourselves what exactly Charles meant when speaking of the Heart of Jesus. We need to look at his words and, perhaps more importantly, at his actions.

Firstly, then, Charles' motto needs to be taken as a whole: the sign of the Heart is in the centre of the words 'Jesus' and 'Caritas'. Clearly it's the sign of the Person, Jesus, and of the basic attitude of that person, Love or loving. Charles makes few references to the 'devotion' as such; his whole concern is with the historical and living person of Jesus, the historical Jesus of Nazareth now living with him, Charles, and with each person he meets. Charles, we know, is fascinated by the person Jesus, as his words and actions so clearly indicate. He is a 'Jesus-man' all through, totally and passionately

absorbed. What particularly strikes him is that 'Jesus' is 'of Nazareth', a poor person of poor parents in a poor village, a person born in poverty and later choosing to associate with the poor, a person who shares our human experience as 'one of the poor' and who shows a preference for those who are, in various ways, deprived and burdened. And as He, Jesus, was on earth, so He is in the here-and-now: Charles is ever conscious of this oneness between the Jesus of history and the same Jesus present with us in our history. And Charles is equally aware that this human Jesus, one of us, sharing all our life and experience, is 'God-with-us'. Our Brother is the unique Son of the Father whose Spirit we are given. Charles never ceases to explore the human personality of Jesus: the way Jesus assumes all the ordinariness of human life, Jesus' choice of the 'last place' and his concern for the 'most abandoned', Jesus as giving and also as ready to receive, Jesus' response to each individual and to the multitudes, Jesus' self-offering for the salvation of 'all'.

Secondly, Charles is increasingly drawn to enter into the attitudes of Jesus. Having experienced Jesus' love and mercy for himself (expressed so vividly in the long meditation on '*my past life - God's mercy*' in Retreat at Nazareth, 1897), and being inspired to 'empty himself' in the absolute love of God, returning love for Love, Charles is moved to imitate and reflect Jesus' own attitude towards others. His long moments of Gospel meditation and long hours of presence to Jesus' Presence while in Nazareth are both acts of love, having their end in themselves, and being a kind of 'absorbing' of the being and way of acting of Jesus. At Beni-Abbes we see the fruit of this process: Charles, with difficulty and some repugnance, is able to give himself to each individual person with their individual needs. Drawn towards Jesus and his Love, Charles wishes 'to act like Jesus'. In Tamanrasset, this effort to share in Jesus' interest and concern for each and every person becomes, increasingly, simple and natural. The sign on the 'gandourah', the red-cloth Heart stitched roughly onto the white-cloth garment, becomes, more and more, a reality: a

reflection of the personalised love of Jesus for each person encountered.

Thirdly, in Tamanrasset particularly, we can notice an emphasis on the quality of God's loving. Charles always sees the Father in Jesus (John 14,9). Constantly reflecting on the human acts of Jesus, with their physical gestures and emotional charge, he sees expressed the 'character' of the Word who is one with the Father. Seeing this, Charles acts out, in his own context, something of the total respect of God for what each person is and does, something of the deep tenderness of God for our human frailty and erring, something of the universality of God's love and concern, that love which touches each of us in our unique particularity and yet embraces all without exception, and which is equally present in the most ordinary of events and experiences and in the most profound. When we look at Charles' attitudes and actions, especially those of his days in Tamanrasset and on the Assekrem, we can, I think, be aware of these divine qualities expressed in an authentically human way, qualities that derive from his union with the Heart of his Beloved Brother and Lord. Of course, there are limitations and, probably, imperfections, but the reflection is unmistakable, and his friends, both Christian and Muslim, did not fail to notice it and to remark on it.

As we know Charles met his death on the 1st of December. That year, it was a Friday, the 'First Friday' of Advent, that special time of waiting for the Lord's coming. And some three weeks after his death, his body was found half-buried in sand, and next to it, also in the sand, was the monstrance in which the Host was still present and intact. Both had been violently cast aside, and 'by chance' both were found together. There are here, perhaps, two small signs which, discreetly, indicate the inner reality of Charles' closeness to the Heart of his Beloved, signs, both of Charles' personal devotion and, more importantly, of that Loving Presence which was at the origin of that devotion and which brought it to completion.

