

checking and lessening his greed for the one sort, and in binding himself with charity to the other. In this his success depends on divine help; it is God who declares, 'Without me you can do nothing' (John xv, 5). When the last day of his life overtakes someone, who has kept faith in the mediator, making this sort of progress, he will be received by the holy angels to be presented to the God he has worshipped and to be perfected by him, and so to receive his body again incorruptible at the end of the world. For only when it comes to the perfect vision of God will this image bear God's perfect likeness.



THE CONVERSION OF CHARLES DE FOUCAULD

JEAN-FR SIX

IN a jotting he made in 1821 J. H. Newman wrote: 'I speak of conversion with great diffidence, being obliged to adopt the language of books. For my feelings, as far as I remember, were so different from any account I have ever read, that I dare not go by what may be an individual case.'

The abbé Huvelin, who was to be God's principal instrument in the conversion of Charles de Foucauld, felt the same difficulty. 'The story of a conversion', he wrote, 'even of one's own, is something that can never be fully understood. You can see the stages that have led up to it, but that is all. Our Lord acts in such a variety of ways.' In this article we will sketch the story of such stages, and investigate as delicately as possible their convergence on the focal-point which constitutes de Foucauld's conversion.

In February 1886 Charles de Foucauld was living in a flat in Paris not far from St Augustine's. He was twenty-eight years old, a man at the height of his powers, and had just completed an exploration of Morocco, which he had conducted with outstanding insight and perseverance. This proud and stoical feat of will-power restored him to the good opinion of his family, which had hitherto looked with decided disapproval on the gay and disreputable life he had been leading.

In Morocco Charles de Foucauld had come across Islam. What struck him most forcibly about it was its profound and characteristic sense of God's greatness. It was this that summoned him to

break free from the round of human futilities he had been caught in, and to find order and harmony of soul in higher things. 'Islam has shaken me to the core. The sight of this faith, of these souls living continually in the presence of God has given me a glimpse of something greater and finer than the preoccupations of this world: *Ad majora nati sumus.*' He met men to whom God meant more than anything else. He had seen Arabs prostrating themselves in prayer, and had recognized the hold God had over them. He had studied Arabic in the Qur'an, and read the teaching of the Prophet, that God is the Only One, and that everything else is subject to him, nothing escapes him, he alone has the right to be worshipped.

He began to grasp the truth that God alone matters, and that man's life is really very simple—to devote yourself utterly to the Most High. Allah akbar. The unconditional gift of oneself to God will thus give a simple unity to life. So it was that the discovery of Islam was the first distant stage of his journey to conversion.

But while recognizing the element of truth to be found in this religion, Charles de Foucauld had the shrewdness to decide that Islam could not be the true religion. It failed to be consistent with itself, or to live up to the truths it professed; indeed it even restricted their application. 'I began to see clearly', he wrote to Henry de Castries, 'that Islam was not built on a divine foundation, and that it was not there the truth was to be found.' Why not? 'Because the essence of love, of worship, is to lose oneself, plunge oneself, in the beloved, and to count everything else as nothing. Islam does not show sufficient contempt for creatures to enable it to teach a love of God that is worthy of God. Without chastity and poverty, love and worship remain very defective. When you love passionately, you cut yourself off from anything that might distract you even for a moment from the beloved, you throw yourself, you lose yourself utterly in him.'

God then proceeded to the next stage of his preparation, the purification of the heart. De Foucauld had somehow been obliged by circumstances to lead a chaste life, but he had soon felt a positive desire to continue it. 'Chastity led me back to my family at the end of the winter of 1885-6, and soon grew to be a delight and a need I could not do without.' This shows how far beyond Islam he had moved. That religion not only did not require chastity, but hardly seemed to value it at all. And yet the puri-

fication effected in de Foucauld by the sense of God's greatness he had imbibed from the Qur'an and from contact with Moslems, now developed quite simply and precisely into a way of life which would have been inconceivable in Islam—and all this before his conversion. Providential indeed was this stage of deliberate chastity. 'It was necessary in order to prepare my soul for the truth. The devil has too much control over a soul that is not chaste to allow truth to enter.'

He was living at this time in close contact with his family. God made great use of family influence in effecting his conversion; above all of his cousin's, Mme de Bondy, who was eight years his senior, and had looked after him like a mother when he had been left an orphan. In this spring of 1886 Charles de Foucauld was still bent on practising a strict morality by purely human efforts—a morality without God. He had 'a taste for virtue, pagan virtue'. His thinking was still obsessed by the ideals of Stoic asceticism. He seemed unable to get any further than an agnosticism which despaired of ever reaching the truth and of telling which religion is the true one. It was at this point that Mme de Bondy proved such a help. She was a remarkable woman, virtuous, kind, discreet; she was to be God's agent in helping Charles de Foucauld bridge the gap between notions of abstract truth and the faith. It was the beauty of her soul which 'drew him to the truth', as he said himself; 'When I see how intelligent that soul is, I am forced to admit that the religion which she believes in cannot be as stupid as I thought'. He was later to say that Mme de Bondy 'was God's assistant', but 'in virtue of her silence, her kindness, her goodness, her perfection'; 'she simply let herself be seen, being good, exercising her attraction, but not taking any action'. The essence of Mme de Bondy's influence on her cousin was quite simply her silent presence.

In this she was only applying the principles and methods of apostolic work advocated by her director, the abbé Huvelin, who used to say, 'When you want to convert a person, it is no use preaching at him; it is much better to show that you love him than to present him with a sermon'.

Such influences as these are no more than preparatory; they do not, of themselves, bring a knowledge of God. Charles de Foucauld, thus worked over by grace, is simply better disposed to receive him; he is still unaware of him as a living reality. 'Despite

all the graces I had received, I still did not know you. You were constantly at work in me and on me. How extraordinary was the speed and energy of your transforming power, and still I was quite unaware of you! At the beginning of October 1886, after living with my family for six months, I esteemed and desired virtue, but I did not know you.'

Our evidence for the last stages leading up to his conversion and for the conversion itself comes from de Foucauld's own pen. He has left us two accounts of his return to God which are very different in character. One is a meditation, the other a letter. The meditation is taken from some notes of a retreat he made at Nazareth from November 5th to 15th, 1897. In it the hermit draws a general picture, in the presence of 'his beloved Jesus', of the stages of his conversion, of his past life and of the mercy of God. The letter, dated August 14th, 1901, is written to his friend Henry de Castries, whose faith had become very insecure. They had not been in touch for fifteen years, and de Foucauld breaks the silence with this account of how he had rediscovered the faith. This letter is written in a concise narrative style, and makes a rapid survey of what had actually happened. The meditation on the other hand does not cover this ground. It harps instead on the solemn theme of God's mercy; on this theme it plays with a slow and majestic splendour. The two accounts are complementary to each other, and together they present us with a strong, clear picture of de Foucauld's conversion.

In the course of October 1886 Charles de Foucauld was beginning to feel a great hunger for God, and an urgent need to speak to him. He started visiting churches and spending long hours in prayer, at the same time experiencing a great weariness. 'Your first grace to me', he wrote, 'was this feeling of starvation. It is here that I see the dawn of my conversion, when I haltingly, timidly, started my journey back to you, making you this strange prayer, "If you exist, make me know you".' From now on God is no longer for Charles de Foucauld just a truth to be learned, he is a person to be met, one who can grant or withhold the knowledge of himself. This transition from 'What is this?' to 'Who art thou?' is vitally important, and this appeal to a 'Thou' implies a recognition that the Other is the Wholly Other, that he is the Almighty, especially as regards the revelation he can make of who he is.

This prayer is not of itself the whole conversion. The intellect is on the defensive, and must make the next step; Charles de Foucauld has been asking himself if the truth he is looking for might not after all be found in the Catholic religion, and he decides to test this hypothesis. So he starts to look round for a good 'professor of the Catholic religion', a *thaleb*,¹ or master, who could instruct him in religion, just as he had once asked for a 'thaleb in Arabic' before his explorations in Morocco.

Whom should he choose? At first he was inclined to the indirect approach, to attend a course of lectures rather than take private instruction from a priest. He had heard of the well attended conferences that the abbé Huvelin gave in the crypt at St Augustine's, and he decided to go to them. And so when Marie de Bondy mentioned at table one day that the abbé Huvelin was ill and would not be giving his conferences that year, and added how disappointed she was, her cousin replied 'So am I, I was counting on going to them'. A few days later he confided to her, 'You are lucky to believe; I look for the light and cannot find it'.

We are well informed about the events on that morning of October 29th or 30th. Charles de Foucauld went into the church to look for the abbé Huvelin, and found him in the confessional. He went up and began to explain that he did not want to make his confession, but would like some 'lessons in religion'. 'There and then', he tells us, 'he made me get down on my knees and make my confession.' Immediately after, at his confessor's command, he went to the altar of our Lady to make his communion.

The abbé's method may seem rather surprising. A man who tells him that he has not got the faith is promptly and firmly ordered to make his confession. But can the curate of St Augustine's have been quite uninformed about the crisis de Foucauld was going through? He must have seen him spending those long hours in church; he would have read on his face the marks of the painful inner conflict he was enduring. And then Mme de Bondy was his spiritual daughter; she must often have spoken to him about her cousin. The really astonishing thing was the abbé's gift of insight into souls, to which many of his contemporaries bore witness. He could tell the precise situation of this soul, who was putting off the final step because his mind was still paralysed with agnosticism. He must above all move the will. Would

1 A catechist who expounds the Qur'an.

learned discussions have succeeded in disengaging this intelligent man from the relativism that had bound his thought for the last ten years? Only determined and definite action could steady him and win his assent. The abbé's remedy perfectly suited the complicated tangle Charles de Foucauld found himself in, and the patient responded to it with that remarkable quality he had of making a clean break with the past.

An abrupt conversion indeed. Everything suddenly changed. God became a living person to him, at once so infinitely beyond him and so very near. Grace seems to have struck him with the speed of lightning. There is a touch of grandeur about this total, unconditional, conversion. Charles de Foucauld recognizes that God is all-powerful, and therefore can effect a total transformation in him. 'In making me enter that confessional, you gave me everything.' The recipient of such a total gift from God must respond in a total way; it is without any reservations at all that he wants to give back his whole life to God. From the moment of his conversion Charles de Foucauld recognized the hold of the transcendent God on every aspect of his life, and all he wanted was to make a complete sacrificial offering of himself in return.

Less than a year before he had written to Gabriel Tourdes, a friend of his, 'Definitive, you know how that word is to be understood. You and I are far too philosophical to suppose that there is anything definitive in this world.' And here he was, ready to make God the absolute gift of himself, and in that very act to detach himself from all created things. His first principle now is that God's greatness requires from man a total oblation of himself, to the very limit of obedience. His is an extraordinarily unyielding faith, utterly consistent with itself. De Foucauld's basic pride and his will to power have been transformed into an unlimited ardour for humility, abasement, poverty. A passage he wrote at Pentecost 1897 is very revealing on this gesture of humility which was the essence of his conversion. 'Faith is incompatible with pride, vainglory, human respect and affection. To believe you must humble yourself'; and he goes on, 'Faith points us to perfection by imitating a God who was abject in his hidden life, and in his public life was persecuted, slandered, jeered at, suspected, and condemned'.

The basic pressure which moved this man was the ceaseless thrust of a faith driving him to give himself more and more to

the Absolute, and to reduce his own stature before him. For the rest of his life Charles de Foucauld was always looking for ways of doing God's will better, adoring him better, humbling himself better. It must not be forgotten that it was given him in his conversion to meet the Lord Jesus intimately in the eucharist. The side of our Lord's life which appealed to him most was his lowliness, his poverty. He, of whose sacrifice he partook after his confession, is Jesus the poor infant of Bethlehem, the stranger from Nazareth, the despised man of Calvary, the one who had willingly given himself to the end. Charles de Foucauld's one desire was to imitate Jesus more and more, with him to empty himself more and more. On the day of his death he wrote, 'Our self-emptying is the most powerful means we have of becoming one with Jesus, and doing some good for souls'.

All this may seem rather discouraging to people who admire Charles de Foucauld, but find themselves incapable of following him. The response of this convert to God's call certainly had something heroic about it. But we should remember that de Foucauld's gift of his life to God, for all its kingly generosity, was also thoroughly simple. His sacrifice was accomplished in the humdrum activities of daily life, in ordinary things—a confession, a communion, a church like any other, a parish curate, a week-day, nothing very unusual on the surface. His all-embracing sacrifice was made in a secret hidden way. In a very real sense the poverty and humility which he offered to God were perfectly in keeping with that acute perception he had of God's transcendence. It is in his awareness of his insignificance before God that he can also be aware of the only gift he can really make to God, the gift of himself. Because he is feeble and weak, the only thing to do is to offer himself to God with complete simplicity of heart.



CONTEMPLATION AND CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE

JAMES HARRISON, O.P.

BY contemplation here I am not referring to any merely natural operation of the intellect, however sublime it may be, but to an operation much more elusive, namely, supernatural contemplation, called also mysticism. It may be