

THE UNIVERSAL BROTHER

Charles de Foucauld
Speaks to Us Today

Published by New City Press
202 Comforter Blvd.,
Hyde Park, NY 12538
www.newcitypress.com

©2019 New City Press

Cover design and layout: Miguel Tejerina
Photos and drawings: *Little Sisters of Jesus*

The Universal Brother:
Charles de Foucauld Speaks to Us Today
Library of Congress Control Number: 2018967123

ISBN 978-1-56548-646-1 (paperback)
ISBN 978-1-56548-647-8 (e-book)

All scripture quotations are taken from the Catholic Edition of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1965, 1966 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Printed in the United States of America

THE UNIVERSAL BROTHER

Charles de Foucauld
Speaks to Us Today

Little Sister Kathleen of Jesus



Charles de Foucauld, a modern-day desert father, invented a new style of contemplative life, inspired by the hidden life that Jesus spent as a carpenter in Nazareth. Foucauld attracted no followers in his life, which ended in 1918 in a remote corner of Algeria. Today, however, his influence extends far beyond the communities inspired by his witness. Truly, he was one of the great saints of modern times. In this beautiful and intimate account of his life and spiritual message, one of his followers, Little Sister Kathleen brings his story to life and shows how keenly his message speaks to our age.

Robert Ellsberg

Editor, *Charles de Foucauld: Writings*

Even those who are familiar with the life of Charles de Foucauld will find many new insights in Little Sister Kathleen's book. It's more than a biography: it's a guide for all of us to living the life of Nazareth; the life of "everyday holiness" as Pope Francis calls it. The Brother Charles who emerges from these pages is alive, endearing, and inspiring.

Rev. Terrence J. Moran

Office of Peace, Justice and Ecological Integrity,
Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth

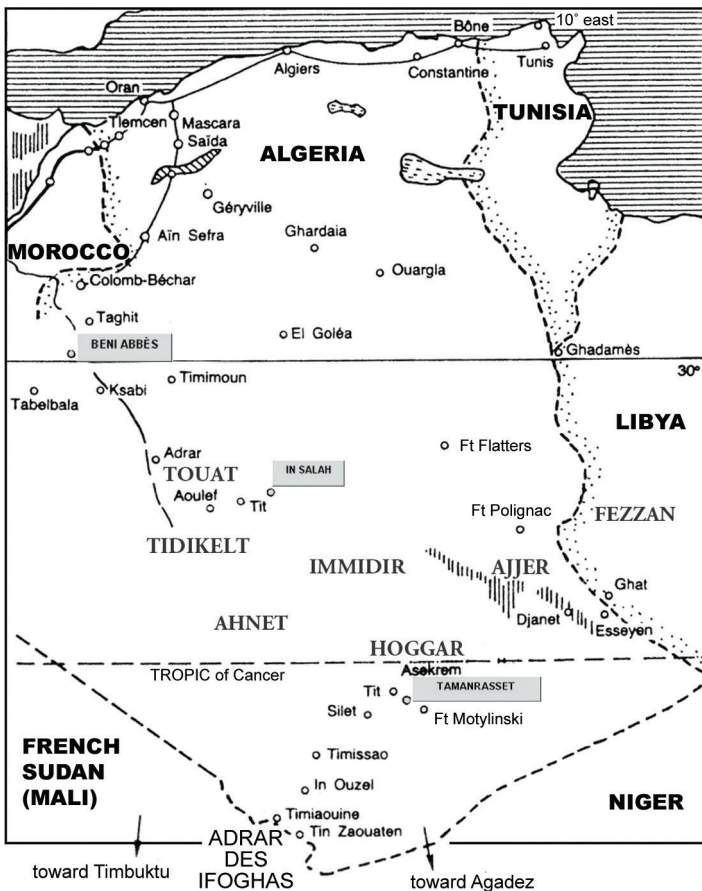
Little Sister Kathleen's biography of Charles de Foucauld is very special. One not only learns details about de Foucauld's life that one had not known before, but Sister Kathleen provides many personal insights into the implications of de Foucauld's spirituality for today. In a world where Islam is so important and where poverty of all types abounds, he calls us to a universal openness. He calls us - whatever one's walk of life - to a spirituality of abandonment into God's hands, encounter with others and the fostering of community, especially with the poor. In a word, he is our universal brother. I highly recommend this book.

Msgr. Richard M. Liddy
Seton Hall University

Contents

| | | |
|---|---|-----|
| 1 | A Short Biography | 9 |
| 2 | My Discovery of a Friend | 24 |
| 3 | From Emptiness to Presence: Turning Religion into Love | 33 |
| 4 | Nazareth: Finding God in Everyday Life | 53 |
| 5 | The Universal Brother | 73 |
| 6 | A Spirituality of the Visitation | 98 |
| 7 | An Enduring Perseverance | 116 |
| 8 | Epilogue | 136 |
| | Selected Bibliography | 139 |

Map of the region Charles de Foucauld lived in



A Short Biography

As night fell on December 1, 1916, Charles de Foucauld died alone in Tamanrasset, a tiny *arrem*¹ in the Algerian Sahara where he had built his hermitage eleven years earlier. Far from any European capitals and the events making headlines during the Great War, his death went largely unnoticed. Yet his embodiment of God's scandalous choice to become man at Nazareth was to make him one of the most influential figures of the Church in the twentieth century. "To be rich and secure, living leisurely off my wealth, when you were poor, needy, and toiled for your living . . . as for me, I couldn't do it, my God. I couldn't love like that."² His spiritual adventure, lived in the midst of a Muslim population, recalls the extent to which God has established the margins as his meeting place with humanity.

His spiritual quest, which today inspires some twenty-one congregations (among them the Little Sisters of Jesus, to which I belong) led him through many twists and turns along a road that stretched from Strasbourg to the far-flung reaches of the Sahara.

-
1. Group of huts and gardens forming a village.
 2. Meditation, Nazareth, November 11, 1897. Editor's note: Translations of de Foucauld's writings and correspondence are done by the author.

Bittersweet memories

Son of an aristocratic French family, Charles de Foucauld was born in 1858, a time when social class mattered a great deal.

He would later speak of bittersweet childhood memories: sweet because he was a well-loved child, bitter because he lost both parents at a very young age. When Charles was four, his father began to show signs of mental illness and was sent to an asylum. The blow affected his young wife so deeply that she died one year later. Both Charles and his younger sister Marie (Mimi) were raised by their grandfather in Strasbourg. Holidays were spent in their Aunt Ines's château. She had two daughters, the youngest of whom, Marie, would have a decisive influence on his life.

After the Franco-Prussian war in 1870, Alsace was annexed by Germany. Charles's grandfather opted to leave Strasbourg and settle in Nancy.

Of a solitary nature, Charles had a friend, Gabriel Tourdes, with whom he shared a passion for literature. At fifteen he ceased to believe in God, something he later attributed to the way he and Gabriel "devoured books."³ After three years of secondary education in Nancy, his grandfather decided to send him to a Jesuit-run school in Paris, hoping it would open the way to a prestigious institute of higher learning. Unfortunately, it only ended with his expulsion, "laziness being not the only reason."⁴ His decision to embark on a military career resulted more from poor marks than an active interest in the military. He spent two years at Saint-Cyr, an academy that trained officers.

3. Letter to Gabriel Tourdes, March 27, 1877.

4. Letter to Marie de Bondy, April 19, 1892.

When Charles was twenty years old, the death of his grandfather, whose “infinite tenderness” enveloped his youth, brought “immense sorrow.”⁵ From Saint-Cyr he moved on to cavalry school at Saumur. The curriculum held no interest for him, and despite his brilliant mind, he came out eighty-seventh of eighty-seven students. His family became increasingly concerned about the lavish loans he extended to his friends.

At the age of twenty-two he was sent as a sub-lieutenant to a garrison on the German border where he became involved with a young woman. Was it a meaningful relationship or did he simply use her as a means of getting out of a dreary job? His refusal to send her away resulted in his suspension from the army, leading one biographer to theorize that the involvement had then achieved its purpose, and Charles felt no real attachment to the woman.⁶ Whatever his feelings might have been, he had “hardly begun to taste the pleasures of life in a lakeside resort in Switzerland” when a letter from a comrade informed him that part of their regiment was involved in combat in Tunisia. Stating that this was “too rare a pleasure not to try to take part,”⁷ Charles requested that his suspension be revoked, promising that he would have nothing further to do with his mistress. The army did indeed take him back, but sent him to Algeria where France was pursuing a vast colonial offensive. Charles took part in operations against Marabutic tribes in the High Plateaus on the Moroccan border. He wrote to Gabriel, “Camp life pleases me as much as life in a garrison displeases me, and that’s really saying something.”⁸ Once the fighting was over he asked

5. Letter to Henri Duveyrier, February 21, 1892.

6. See Pierre Sourisseau, *Charles de Foucauld (1858-1916): Biographie*, Paris: Salvator, 2016.

7. Both quotes, Letter to Gabriel Tourdes, October 2, 1881.

8. Ibid.