

The Lasting Legacy of Blessed Charles de Foucauld

“Dazzled by the Absolute.”

That description of Charles de Foucauld by one of his several biographers will receive the Church's de facto confirmation later this year when Pope Francis canonizes this most unusual man as a saint.

Yet de Foucauld's path to sanctity was no steady march down a straight and narrow path. The stages of his personal odyssey covered a spectrum that extended from teenage agnostic, playboy military cadet, rebellious army officer and intrepid explorer all the way to ardent convert, Trappist monk, hermit and mystic.

A winding journey

Charles de Foucauld was born Sept. 15, 1858, in Strasbourg, France, the son of Catholic parents who were part of the old French nobility. His parents died when he was 6, and he and his younger sister were raised by his grandfather, a retired military officer whose “infinite tenderness” Charles later recalled with affection.

During the Franco-Prussian war in 1870, the family fled to Nancy, France, where the boy grew up. In his teens, he came to disbelieve in religion and even in the existence of God. Later, he described himself as having been “all selfishness, all impiousness, all evil desire.”

Opting for a military career, he studied at the French army academy and then at the training school for cavalry officers. But even in those citadels of discipline he led a notably self-indulgent life, spending lavishly from the inheritance left him by his grandfather on women and gourmet meals.

When his regiment went to Algeria in 1881, Second Lieutenant de Foucauld disobeyed his commanding officer and brought his mistress with him, leading to his suspension from the army. But after fighting broke out, he returned to active duty and performed in exemplary fashion as an officer in the field.

Finding peacetime army life a bore, however, he resigned. In 1883-84, with his life frequently at risk, he explored a large swath of southern Morocco. The result was a widely praised book, *Reconnaissance au Maroc*, on the geography and culture of a little known region that earned him a gold medal from the Geographic Society of Paris.

Second Miracle

On May 26, Pope Francis signed the decree approving a second miracle credited to the intercession of Blessed Charles de Foucauld, paving the way for his canonization. The miraculous healing took place in late 2016 – the 100-year anniversary of de Foucauld’s death. A carpenter helping to restore the chapel at a Catholic high school in Saumur, France, fell more than 50 feet and was impaled by the foot of a bench that had been turned over. According to a report by Aleteia, doctors were adamant that falling from such height and being impaled generally cause organs to “explode.” With a part of the bench still stuck inside him, the man reportedly got up and walked away. He was hospitalized for just six days and returned to work within two months.

Returning to France restless and uncertain about the direction of his life, he began thinking seriously about the Faith he had abandoned. Then, at Mass in a Paris church on Oct. 30, 1886, he experienced a profound conversion.

After that, there was no looking back. “As soon as I came to believe there was a God,” he said, “I understood that I could not do otherwise than live only for him.”

Finding his vocation

First he tried the Trappists, but, finding life at a French monastery too easy going for him, he transferred to an impoverished monastery in Syria. Meanwhile, the idea that he had a different calling kept gnawing at him, and in 1897, released from his vows by the Trappists, he traveled to the Holy Land and in Nazareth became a hermit-handyman living in a hut outside a convent of Poor Clare nuns.

Already, de Foucauld was dreaming of a new religious order, the Little Brothers of Jesus, combining monastic life with extreme poverty and asceticism. In 1901, he received ordination as a priest. A year later he wrote, "I am collapsing under the weight of all my blessings, of the vision of what I should be, of the vision of the good that I should do and of the good that would be done were I to be sanctified."

But where? His search led him to Algeria and finally to Tamanrasset, a remote hamlet where the poorest of the poor lived on the edge of the Sahara, the vast desert whose stark beauty enraptured him. In his hermitage there he prayed, offered Mass, gave food and medicine to the locals and worked on a dictionary of the language of the Tuaregs, a nomadic people of the Sahara. The book was published after his death.

By now de Foucauld had given up on the idea of evangelizing by preaching. His way was to be the way of example. "On seeing me," he explained, "people should say to themselves, since this man is so good, his religion must be good."

'I give it to you, Lord'

Even so, he considered French colonialism, then in its heyday, a potential vehicle for evangelization, while also criticizing it as he often found it. In the years France had ruled Algeria, he wrote a friend, "There has been so little

attention to saving Muslim souls that it could be said there has been no attention. Or to governing them well," he added. "If France does not govern her colony better, she will lose it, and these people will slip back into barbarism, and the hope of Christianizing them will be lost for a very long time."



The hermitage of Charles Foucauld, built in 1911, is located on the Assekrem in the Hoggar mountains of southern Algeria. Patrick Gruban/Wikimedia Commons

On Dec. 1, 1916, marauders entered Tamanrasset after nightfall and seized Father de Foucauld, intending to hold him for ransom. But a nervous teenager, set to guard him, shot him to death instead.

At the time of his death, he considered himself a failure: no converts except one old woman who looked to him for support, no candidates for his religious order, no lasting achievement of any kind. Yet today there are more than a dozen religious congregations and associations inspired by him, while numerous books and articles have been published on his life and thought.

Pope St. John Paul II declared him "venerable" in 2001; Pope Benedict XVI pronounced him "blessed" in 2005, and this past

May the Vatican announced that Pope Francis had accepted a second miracle attributed to his intercession and would canonize him at a later date.

Many people recite his prayer of abandonment that reads, in part: "I put my soul in your hands, I give it to you, Lord, with all the love in my heart, because I love you, and because it is for me a need of love to give myself, to put myself in your hands unreservedly with infinite trust. For you are my Father."

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