**WHEN THE SAINTS …**

1st of DECEMBER CHARLES de FOUCAULD

3RD of DECEMBER FRANCIS XAVIER

4TH of DECEMBER JOHN of DAMASCUS

4TH of DECEMBER NICHOLAS FERRAR

6TH of DECEMBER NICHOLAS

CHARLES de FOUCAULD was a puzzling figure to his contemporaries, and is still so for those who deign to notice him at all. Fortunately, one of those who does is Bishop John V Taylor, from whose book ‘The Go-between God’ there is a passage quoted below. Atwell simply heads him up as a hermit in the Sahara, but in his life and influence he was a great deal more.

Charles was born into a very wealthy aristocratic family in Strasbourg in 1858, and when the Germans took control of Alsace in 1870 the family moved to Nancy in Lorraine. At the age of 4 his father was committed to an asylum, and a year later his mother died, seemingly of a broken heart. Charles and his sister Marie were taken care of by their grandfather, with holidays spent at the chateaux of their Aunt Inez, who had two daughters, the youngest of whom, also named Marie, was to become an important figure in Charles’ later life. Meanwhile, a somewhat withdrawn child, he made one close and special friend, Gabriel Tourdes, with whom he shared the reading of all kinds of books avidly. It was at this time, aged 15, that Charles lost his Catholic faith.

After 3 years of secondary education, at age 18 Charles’ grandfather sent him to a prestigious Jesuit college in Paris with high hopes, but after two years he was expelled, laziness not being the sole reason, as his biographer tactfully puts it. At age 20 his grandfather died, causing Charles enormous pain for the loss of his ‘infinite tenderness that had enveloped his childhood.’ Poor marks virtually drove him into a military career, so he commenced training at the Academy at Saumur as a cavalry officer, emerging 87th of 87! If you think about it, nobody at the Academy would have wished a rich aristocrat to so disgrace the institution, but Atwell adds that he lived a dissipated life there. Posted to a garrison on the German border he took up with a mistress whom he refused to send away, and was suspended by the army.

Recently settled on a Swiss lakeside for a life of pleasure, a comrade informed him that part of his regiment was to take part in a campaign in Tunisia, at which Charles stirred his stumps and asked for his suspension to be lifted, and agreed to send his mistress away. In the event, however, he was posted to Algeria where he fought against Maraboutic tribes near the Moroccan border. At this time France was establishing herself as the sole colonial power in the Maghreb, and when this campaign came to an end he asked to be sent anywhere there was action, but this request was denied, so he quit the army and decided to go travelling. By this time, having also caused the family anxiety by handing out extravagant loans here and there, they finally took drastic action and placed him under legal guardianship.

The turning point came in 1883: finding himself fascinated by the land and its people, Charles decided to explore the interior of Morocco. Of the three ‘nations’ of the Maghreb, Morocco is the only country that was never conquered either by the Romans or by the Ottomans, although it had provided a base from which the Arabs conquered Spain from 711. It was then, and still is riven with tribal feuds, and Europeans were forbidden to travel into the interior, although Tangiers and the coastal areas have always fascinated them. After 15 months studying Arabic and cartography at the Algerian library, Charles decided to pass himself off as a Jew, and hired a Moroccan Jewish guide with whom he explored the country for over a year. During this time his life was saved on several occasions thanks to the laws and conventions of hospitality in the desert, and he became both interested and moved by living with poor Muslim tribesmen.

Back in Algiers he set about publishing his findings, and in April 1885 the Paris Geographical Society awarded him their gold medal.

Having at long last found a niche, his inquisitive mind searched for deeper meanings, and he remained in Paris, tightening his bonds with the family, and read extensively, searching for answers. At this time the faith-centred life of his cousin Marie attracted him and he confided his search to her. Marie recommended him to Father Ouvelin, no more than a local curate, but famous for his spiritual counsel. In October 1886 Charles asked him for lessons in religion, but Ouvelin invited him straightaway to confession. In 1888 his work was published but by now Charles was taking almost daily instruction from Ouvelin, who suggested a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, where he spent two months, and determined on his vocation to follow in the footsteps of the one ‘who took the last place,’ but what would that actually mean in practice?

Next he joined a Trappist monastery in central France which had set up a daughter house in Syria, to where in 1890, he was quickly dispatched. His abbot was impressed by Charles having renounced his wealth, status and his budding career, and remarked that he had never met anybody who emanated such holiness; but his novice master foresaw that he would be unlikely to remain, and after 7 years Charles referred the discernment of his vocation to the Abbot General in Rome, to whom it soon became clear that this eccentric monk was being called elsewhere, and in January 1897 he left the Trappists, although his formation as a monk never left him.

Back to Fr Ouvelin’s spiritual direction, Charles returned to Palestine and enquired of the Poor Clares at Nazareth whether they needed a workman. The sisters knew who he was, and offered him a room, but he spotted a tool shed at the back of the house, which became his hermitage for the next three years. His services to the sisters consisted mainly of serving at Mass and going to the post office. These were years of some highs but much dryness, and Ouvelin advised him to write down his thoughts so as to clear his mind, and he spent hours and hours reading the Gospel, and particularly Jesus’ prediction of the last judgement in Matthew: ‘whatever you do to the least of these in my name you do to me also.’

The abbess of the house in Jerusalem conspired to have Charles sent to her, and guided his thoughts in the direction of the priesthood, which he had previously dismissed. He also realised that, rather than remain as a hermit, he should become the centre of what he proposed to be ‘The Hermits of the Sacred Heart;’ but to found such an order he would need to be a priest, so back to Paris and Fr Ouvelin he went, who, by this time, was getting confused, but fixed him up again with the Trappists of ‘Our Lady of the Snows,’ who agreed to undertake his formation. Eventually he was ordained. His pre-ordination retreats helped him to recall those people in Morocco by whom he had been so fascinated, and by the time of his priesting he realised that he should become a ‘brother’ rather than a hermit.

Following permissions and negotiations with the army and the church Charles bought some land at Tamanrasset, among the Tuaregs of Algeria, where, assisted by the army, he built a small and very primitive hostel that could welcome up to 25 people. There were visitors from among the locals, the army and travellers, but none of the existing foundations felt they could risk sending him a candidate to join his brotherhood.

In time he gained the love and trust of the locals, none of whom he ever attempted to convert, thinking only that the example of his life might inspire those around him to enquire about his faith. This is the principle that Bishop Taylor discusses below.

Charles felt, to some extent, compromised by his association with the army of the colonial power, but the commanding general wished to assert soft power peacefully rather than to conquer by force, and Charles was thought of as ‘a holy man let loose among the tribesmen and women,’ whom he would persuade to receive army protection in peace.

However successful his personal presence, Charles never received a candidate to join him as a brother, although he had a huge circle of ministry and support, not to mention love and respect, among the Marabout, and he was adopted as a Marabout among them.

In 1916 the tribesmen became victims of the Zanussi, a jihadi sect who invaded the little village and had Charles tied up outside. When a relief force was spied on its way, panic ensued and the 16-year-old boy deputed to guard him shot Charles in the head. He was buried with three Muslims who had died in the same raid. In the middle of World War 1 his assassination hardly merited a headline.

Charles has been criticised from all sides; sacred and secular: from the latter, because having decided to fit in with the Tuaregs he had taken trouble to learn the language and its poetry and folklore, and subsequent social anthropologists wished he had spent more time and energy in pursuit of that side of his career, while religious critics were concerned about his ties with the colonial army and the fact that, whilst living a life of utter poverty, whenever he wanted anything he could resort to family influence and fortunes. Neither critique is fair: he completed his translations only three days before his death, and his family, and in particular his cousin Marie, had been his friend and mentor since his conversion. He failed to make protests about the Tuareg slave trade, but it is rather difficult to imagine what such protest might have achieved, particularly in view of his choice to remain simply as a Christian presence.

In 1933 ‘The Little Sisters’ were set up along Charles’ lines, and in 1945 a ‘Little Brotherhood’ followed. Charles was eventually canonised in 2005.

A PASSAGE from ‘THE GO-BETWEEN GOD’ by Bishop JOHN V TAYLOR, 1962

A classic on mission, new edition due January 2021

A true missionary is one who, like Enoch, walks with God, and derives from constant communion with him a portion of the divine likeness.

This is the real meaning of the approach to mission which has come to be known as ‘Christian presence.’ It is often confused with that method of approach to people of other faiths that is known as ‘dialogue.’ Christian presence and dialogue may often go hand in hand, it is true, but they are not the same. One of the purest examples of Christian presence which has ever been demonstrated is that of Charles de Foucauld, and of those who have followed in his steps, the Little Brothers and Little Sisters of Jesus. Yet they have placed themselves under rule not to preach, nor to offer organised works, such as schools, hospitals, nor to employ any of the usual methods of evangelism. They believe they are simply called to live among the very poor of this world, upon a houseboat amid the teeming refugees of Hong Kong, around a tiny courtyard on one of the sloping streets of Kabul, in the Eskimo hamlet in Alaska, a shanty suburb of Kampala, a labourers’ settlement in Port Moresby, built on wooden piles above the sea like any other village of Papua.

Unobtrusively, they keep a routine of communal prayer and silent adoration, and every day they go out in their working clothes to do the same sort of job that their neighbours are doing and to offer them an unstinted friendship in the doing of it. Out of sight, out of mind of the Church as a whole, way below the poverty line, scattered in their twos and threes across the face of the earth they do not work for their neighbours, they work with them. Their role is that of prayer and of a silent, hidden presence of love.

Such extreme renunciation of all the normal activities of nation would suggest either a lack of concern or a policy of despair, were it not for Charles de Foucauld’s ardent passion for evangelism. ‘I wish to cry the Gospel by my whole life,’ he said; and again; ‘For the spreading of the Gospel I am ready to go to the ends of the earth and I am likewise ready to live until the day of judgement.’ To live thus totally towards God for the sake of the world is a profoundly missionary and, indeed, redemptive way.

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FRANCIS XAVIER [1506-51] Like Ignatius of Loyola, was a Basque, born in Navarre and educated at Paris University where he met Ignatius and was one of the original seven who signed up with him to form the Jesuit order, taking vows at Montmartre in 1534 and being ordained in Venice three years later.

Francis joined Simon Rodriguez at Lisbon, and in 1541, at the invitation of King John III of Portugal Francis, armed with a Papal appointment as Nuncio for the East, sailed to Goa where he set up his HQ, and made some important reforms to the abuses and cruelties that were the habitual practices of Portuguese priests and colonizers to their slaves seemingly wherever they landed, in India, and in Africa particularly. Francis wrote poetry expressing Christian truths which he set to popular tunes; another example from the 16th century of some of the most significant figures using music in their ministries with great success.

In southern India Francis achieved equal success in converting the lower castes, and the Paravas in particular, whom, it is suggested, he may well have saved from extermination. Before moving to Ceylon, Malacca, the Moluccan islands and the Malay Peninsula, he never seems to have made converts among the more exalted strata of these eastern societies, probably because he presented as a poor man, eating mainly rice and water and sleeping in huts or wherever he could find shelter.

In time he moved to Japan, where his failure to meet the Mikado without a gift the value of which would have far exceeded his resources, he changed tack; got himself up in rich garb, and claimed to be an emissary of King John. His missionary activities achieved some success until Christianity was repressed by the government in reaction to the arrival of Dutch and English merchants competing for trade and causing dissension. Francis’ next destination was China, but, suffering horribly from sea sickness, and in generally poor health, he died on the way.

The Portuguese were finally thrown out of India in 1965, and in his book ‘India in slow motion’ the former BBC Delhi correspondent and theology graduate Mark Tully carried an article about the church in Goa in which he made it plain that the caste system was still alive and well in that the richest and most prestigious ecclesiastical appointments were held by converts who had originally come from the higher castes, whereas the poorer clergy were left with the poorer churches, a state of affairs that was endemic in most Protestant churches, including our own, until more recently than most of us might like to think.

Many churches throughout the world are named in honour of St Francis Zavier.

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JOHN of DAMASCUS [655-750] was born into a Christian family in Damascus, under Muslim control. His father, however, was a Christian, given high office under the Abbasid Kalifate, as many Jews and Christians were under Muslim domination, and besides being the chief representative of the Christian community in Damascus, he was also head of the Revenue.

John received an excellent education in both science and theology at the hands of Cosmas, a Sicilian monk whom John’s father had paid a lot of money for the purpose. John succeeded his father, but in 716 he became a monk himself, and later a priest, and moved to the monastery at Mar Saba, near Jerusalem, where he spent the rest of his life.

John was an important writer of hymns, and his three treatises against iconoclasm, the destruction of all images derived from Christian spirituality, were of such great influence that the Byzantine emperors who supported it, were unable to capture and punish John as they wished, because he lived in Muslim-controlled territory.

John is also credited, if that is the word, with translating parts of the Koran into Greek, but if it was him, later scholarship fell into some serious misunderstandings in their attacks against Islam because of some rather crass mistranslations, and none of this improved interfaith relations.

When we looked at Cyril of Alexandria and the Counsel of Chalcedon of 451, it was mentioned that some bishops who disagreed with its conclusions split off and formed other churches. In Muslim-controlled areas Christians from these churches tended to be preferred to the rump of Chalcedonian Orthodoxy that remained, simply because as ‘Melkites’ [Arabic Malik = king] they were associated with the Emperor of Constantinople, the Muslims’ public enemy number 1.

John’s principal achievement, however, came in the form of three major books of philosophy and theology, of which the third, known in Latin translation as ‘De Fide Orthodoxa,’ presents a summation of eastern theology, mainly Christological, probably intended to arm the ‘Melkite’ [Byzantine] community in Syria with a clear statement of doctrine, because Antioch and Jerusalem, both under Muslim control, had been without a patriarch for some time. This third treatise was translated into Latin and Slavonic and exerted great influence for many centuries to come. John is honoured as one of the doctors of the Eastern Church, and is often thought of as the last of the Great Church Fathers.

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NICHOLAS FERRAR [1592-1637] is famous for the foundation of the Little Gidding Community.

Born in London, educated at Clare Hall, Cambridge, he became a fellow but on account of his poor health he left Cambridge and until 1618 he travelled around Europe for five years, mainly in Germany Italy and Spain, and on his return took employment at the Virginia company, of which he became Deputy Treasurer in 1622. At the dissolution of the company in 1624 Ferrar then tried his luck as an MP, but he became disillusioned with the life of ’the world’ which his contemporary George Herbert described with his unique wit as ‘Nothing between two dishes.’

On the death of his father Ferrar came into an estate sufficient to purchase some land at Little Gidding, 13 miles northwest of Huntingdon, a deserted village with a hall and a parish church nearby.

Ferrar moved his entire family into the manor – between 30 and 40 of them - and set up a community based on the BCP and the ‘hours’ prescribed by the Church of England. This involved worship from 6am, 10am and 4pm, with the entire Psalter read each day by family members sharing the undertaking: all four Gospels were read each month, and hymns and anthems sung, which would have required appropriate musical training: there was an organ in church that was put to use. In 1626 William Laud consecrated Ferrar deacon.

This was not all: the community looked after the sick; supported the poor; set up a school and a dispensary, and generally took care of their neighbours. In 1633 Charles I visited and was impressed.

Ferrar died in 1637, but the community continued its work, but in 1641, having attracted the suspicion of puritans who feared that the community might be importing Romish practices, a pamphlet was circulated describing it as ‘the Arminian nunnery,’ and in 1649 Cromwell’s soldiers raided Little Gidding, dispersed the community and burned most of Ferrar’s manuscripts.

Ferrar and his whole project were largely forgotten until 1881 when a popular historical novel was published accurately portraying the community as background to an entirely fictitious romance. T S Eliot featured Little Gidding in his ‘Four Quartets,’ and an entirely new ecumenical community and farm was set up there in 1971.

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NICHOLAS was a 4th-century Bishop of Myra in Asia Minor who did exist, although most of what we know about him comes from a hagiography of the 9th century.

Nicholas is reputed to have worked wonders, but his principal fame rests in his love and care for children. One story goes that he saved three girls from a life of prostitution, because their families were too poor to provide a dowry, so that by night he is said to have posted bags of money anonymously through their windows, and in most countries his charity is celebrated at Christmas.

In the Netherlands, however, presents are exchanged on this day, although if you visit the Rijksmuseum you may come across a horrible painting by one of the school of morality in which a little girl is enjoying her gift with a smile, while a little boy is holding a piece of coal and crying, because he has clearly displeased his family throughout the previous year, or, at least, that is the message the artist intends. The idea of creating such a dummy run for the last judgement appears to have emanated originally from Spain.

Nicholas in English becomes Nikolaus in Dutch, shortened to Klaus: hence Santa Klaus. Reindeer is a good deal tastier than turkey but that’s a secret the Scandinavians seem to have kept to themselves.