

CHARLES DE FOUCAULD AND ENGLAND¹

DURING our stay in England last summer, we were constantly struck by the fact that when people—both priests and laymen—would ask, as they often did, what Order we belonged to, there would be no reaction if we said, ‘The Little Brothers of Jesus’; but if one of us were to add, ‘The Little Brothers of Father de Foucauld’, faces would immediately light up and we could see, much to our gratification, what a familiar figure this hermit of the Sahara was to our inquirers—the hermit who was murdered there in the desert in 1916, after a life completely given to God, and at the same time to the most destitute of mankind, in imitation of his Lord and Brother’s life at Nazareth. We were therefore led to conclude that, while, thanks to various writings—the most recent of which is, I believe, *Desert Calling* by Anne Fremantle—Father de Foucauld himself was far from unknown in England, it was not yet generally realised among English Catholics that he had given birth to a rapidly growing spiritual family, the ‘Little Brothers of Jesus’ and the ‘Little Sisters of Jesus’.

It is true that Father de Foucauld was a rather unusual kind of founder. As far back as 1905 he knew, as he wrote, that ‘Jesus wishes me to work for the establishment of this double family . . . in supplication, in self-immolation; by dying to myself, sanctifying myself—by loving him, in short’; and he did so for twenty years, meanwhile drafting as many as four successive Rules for his ‘little brothers and sisters’ to come. He however waited in vain for his first disciple to appear, and died without having been able to achieve this most cherished of his human desires. ‘A grain of wheat must fall into the ground and die’, he would repeat, ‘but I am still alive!’ And, in fact, it was only seventeen years after his death that the ‘Little Brothers’ came into existence.

¹ This article was written by one of the Little Brothers of Jesus who spent last summer working in England. It is intended to introduce English readers to the spirit of a new Order which has a special importance for our own time.—*Editor*.

In 1901, Father de Foucauld noted that he had 'learnt from the Gospel that the first commandment is to love God with all my heart and that everything must be included, nay, enclosed in love; and imitation, as everyone knows, is a consequence of love. I did not feel myself capable of imitating Jesus' public life, in his preaching; I therefore must imitate his "hidden" life as the humble workman of Nazareth.' And again, later, 'I cannot believe that one understands what love is unless one seeks to resemble him and unless one feels the need of sharing each and every cross'. Indeed, the striking thing about the life of Father de Foucauld is just this passionate love of our Lord, carrying him to an adoration and an imitation of the most absolute sort. Not content with the life of a Trappist in France, he went off to Nazareth and settled there, unknown, in a miserable little hut, spending the greater part of his days and nights at the feet of Jesus in the Eucharist, on the very spot where the Christ-Child lived with his Blessed Mother and Saint Joseph. From this single source, all the rest was to come, and in particular an extraordinary intimacy with Jesus—a continuous dialogue between two friends, which lasted until Father de Foucauld's death.

And since friendship of this quality leads to as complete a sharing as possible of intentions and aim, it became Father de Foucauld's essential work to share as perfectly as he could in the work of the Redemption, in self-humiliation and upon the Cross. He achieved this collaboration not only through endless supplication and constant prayer for the salvation of all mankind, but still more perhaps through sacrifice and the sharing of suffering. It was this single and unique love that gave him his equally passionate love for men, with a special predilection for the most wretched. It was likewise this dual love which, in the end, led him to the Sahara Desert, because the people of Morocco—four million human beings without a single priest—were the most destitute he knew of. Here, in a Moslem village, he was to live, a silent witness of the Gospel; by no means cut off from the people by his silence, however, but rather in the closest possible contact with them.

The example thus set by Father de Foucauld has been

followed by the Little Brothers and the Little Sisters in answering the call of our Lord and trying to imitate his life at Nazareth and live the Gospel message amongst the poor and the 'unimportant', with a fraternal love for all creatures and in constant eucharistic prayer; trying to share his labours as the Saviour, and help bear the burdens of their brother men, so as to enter the better into the work of the Redemption.

During his years at Nazareth, Jesus avoided revealing his presence not by remaining apart from the people—for to have chosen to withdraw from his surroundings and live in solitude would have been to attract attention to himself by the very unusualness of such a course—but by mixing with his fellow citizens whenever he could, by burying himself as it were in obscurity, by 'disappearing' into the everyday. Religious, bound by the traditional vows of poverty, obedience and chastity, which they take at the end of their canonical noviciate of one year in the Sahara, the Little Brothers likewise lead their religious life amongst the people. The only thing that distinguishes them outwardly from others is the insignia they wear on their breasts—a cross with a heart in its centre, the sign of their belonging to our Lord. Father de Foucauld's white robe with the red heart and cross on it has, however, been taken as their choir habit and they put this on for Mass and all-night adoration. They live, three or four together, but no more, in what they call a 'fraternity', this usually consisting in a small house or flat (always rented and never owned by them), with one room turned into a chapel, where they have daily Mass together, said by one of the brothers who is a priest; recite together the principal hours of the breviary (those who are priests of course reciting the entire breviary), and also spend an hour individually in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament each day.

They earn their own living, and do so almost always with some kind of manual labour, since they live preferably amongst the humblest and the 'littlest', who, in highly industrialised countries like ours, are so often reduced to existing from day to day, as it were, working at some monotonous and uninspiring job. If one were to attempt to define

their vocation, one might say that it consists in keeping their inner gaze upon our Lord for the men and women around them or in acting as the self-elected 'delegates to prayer' of the crowds that do not know him, carrying to him on their behalf their sufferings and their worship.

No difference is made between the Little Brother who is a priest and the one who is not, except of course where the functions of the priest are concerned: they all call each other 'brother'; they all work—exactly like the Cistercians who, whether they be choir monks or lay brothers, lead the same life of labour. This they do, however, not in the peace and solitude of the monastery, but rather, as I have said, in the midst of their brother men, 'unseen', deep in the heart of the mass that, more often than not, no longer knows—or has never known—either God or the Church. And here their purpose is to love—to love, not with their own love, not just anyhow, but with God's own love for all men.

As the name they bear indicates, their desire is to be 'little' in their entire conduct: the methods and means they utilise in every connection are of the least costly and simplest; they employment they seek is of the most modest; they engage in no planned or organised apostolate; they pursue no immediate efficacy for souls. They are merely there: present. Present in silence. Present with prayer. Present with friendship. And lest it be thought that their attitude involves any lack of respect for action or, again, any lack of desire to influence and convert, let me add that their purpose is simply to imitate Jesus during his thirty years of silence at Nazareth, preparing for his three years of public life.

This is one of the points which distinguish the Little Brothers from the 'priest-workers' on the Continent who, incidentally, seem to be somewhat misunderstood in England. The priest-workers were brought into being in order to meet a particular and tragic situation, viz., that of the general falling-away from the Faith of the working classes of France and Belgium. The bishops, responsible as they were before God for the masses thus separated from the Church (separated, indeed, to a point which it is perhaps difficult for anyone who has not had direct experience of the situation to

appreciate), found themselves confronted with the necessity of employing new and exceptional methods of apostolate, just as Saint Paul did in the early days of the Church or as any pioneer missionary has had to do since. The objective was to *found* the Church again amongst the masses, and preach the good word; and the priest-workers' work in the factories is merely a means to this end. The means, in point of fact, is temporary, and will be discontinued once the situation in question has been altered.

Such is not the case with the Little Brothers of Jesus: their mission is—and so it is intended it shall remain—to live their lives as religious amongst the 'little people', whatever the latter's material or religious status, as constant reminders of the presence of God and the Church in their midst, as also of the essential values of prayer and brotherly love; helping those who suffer to see the redemptive virtue of suffering and those who, living under conditions of greater ease, may be tempted to allow their material comfort to take possession of them, to see the significance of evangelical detachment.

It will easily be understood that the lives of the Little Brothers should, as they do, take on as many different outward forms as their individual vocation may dictate. The only requirements here are that they shall remain faithful to their general vocation as I have attempted to describe it, and that they shall be prepared not to confine it to any particular country or any particular race. Whether they are to be factory or farm workers, miners or seamen, postmen or dock hands, students in theology or patients in a hospital, in France or Belgium, North Africa or South America; whether they are to be craftsmen or day labourers in the Near East or Israel, woodmen in the forest of Canada, or to work amongst the lepers in the Cameroons or the nomads of the Sahara or the pygmies in the Belgian Congo—and all this is actually the case—they are possessed of but one desire, to go to their fellow men, out of love for Christ, in a spirit of filial obedience towards the Church, wherever it may see fit to send them. And thus they go, throughout the world, confident that their hearts will thus become constantly more open to men of all races and peoples, and

closer and closer to the universal love of Our Lord.

The question may be asked whether this kind of life would be possible in England and, if so, whether it would be helpful. My own impression is decidedly favourable, since the Little Brothers' vocation is to imitate Jesus in his concealment and 'unimportance'; and no consideration of time or place can affect the validity of this call. It would of course be extremely presumptuous of me to claim to know England and the English workers after a stay of two months in an English town and a few weeks working in an English quarry. It does seem to me, however, that the position as regards the Church is substantially different in England from what it is on the Continent: a good percentage of English Catholics, for instance, belong to the poorer classes, and practise their religion, in general, considerably better than is at present the case with people in similar circumstances in France. To put it briefly, in England there has been no break between the Church and the Catholic worker; the Catholic worker, however, represents only a small minority of the workers in England.

In a recent article entitled, 'The Established Church and the Masses', an Anglican periodical published in French (*Bulletin Anglican*, September 1952) stated that 'the working masses today are profoundly estranged from the Church (of England), and utterly ignorant of the Christian faith; and their ignorance goes the deeper because many of them received but little religious instruction when they were young, and they therefore do not know how ignorant they actually are'. If I can judge from the few contacts we had with non-Catholic workers and our conversations with numerous priests, I should be inclined to think that this quotation faithfully describes the present position as regards the great majority of the English working class vis-à-vis religion in general. They still cling to traditionally Christian habits of thought and feeling, but there would seem to be little living faith in Christ and the Church amongst them.

There is likewise the fact that the English worker enjoys a high standard of living, at least in comparison with that of the Continental worker, and, while one can but admire the results of the efforts made in England to do away with

material misery, at the same time one cannot help wondering whether the English worker has not 'settled' somewhat into his comfort and security, for he would seem to betray traces of spiritual misery, due perhaps precisely to this greater ease, coupled with lack of knowledge as to how to counteract its ill effects. The presence amongst these 'newly poor' of religious living in a spirit of evangelical poverty and self-effacement for sheer love of our Lord, I venture to think, would act upon them as a visible reminder, first of the transcendence and immanence of God, secondly of his worthiness to be worshipped for his own sake, whatever the apparent resulting subtraction of time from one's human activities and satisfactions, and thirdly of the importance of the Christian values of poverty, chastity and obedience.

To those who have always seen the Church through prejudiced eyes, the Church itself, coming to them thus on their own level, would perhaps appear in a different and truer light. Catholics themselves might also benefit—first of all, the Catholic workers, who are frequently alone of their kind 'on the job' and whose faith is often threatened not only by their frequent state of fatigue but also by the indifference of the other workers surrounding them. (We were able to observe, for instance, that the majority of the born Catholics working in the same quarry as ourselves had entirely given up practising.) Secondly, the other Catholics would perhaps be made better aware of the fact that it is by no means necessary to retire from the world in order to lead the life of religion, but that this may be done quite simply *in* the world, in the midst of the most prosaic, and even monotonous, existence.

A last point to be emphasised is that it is not the Little Brothers' purpose just to *be* poor and 'unimportant', whatever class of society they may originally have come from; they also constitute an Order *for* the poor and unimportant. More often than not, when a young man of lowly or modest condition enters a religious Order his action is looked upon as placing him higher in the social scale. I remember how one of the men in our quarry said to me one day, 'When you have become a priest you will not go out to work any more, of course; you will be a gentleman then, won't you?'

I believe that remark typifies the feeling of the working people towards religious in general, as also towards the clergy. The fact that one can become a religious while remaining on the same social level may well prove to be a happy discovery for many young men who feel drawn to devote themselves to their own kind of people and might otherwise be deterred from taking orders. I am indeed encouraged to believe this when I recall one of the bishops by whom we were received during our stay in England saying, 'I know that in order for the "little people" to discover Christ and the Church, one must go and live amongst them'.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

THOMAS DEMAN, O.P.; Professor of Moral Theology in the University of Fribourg (Switzerland).

B. A. WORTLEY, LL.D., O.B.E.; Professor of Jurisprudence and International Law in the University of Manchester.

ERIC COLLEDGE; Senior Lecturer in English in the University of Liverpool. Translator and editor of Ruysbroek's *Spiritual Espousals* (Faber, 1952).

SAUNDERS LEWIS; Senior Lecturer in Welsh Literature in the University College of South Wales and Monmouthshire; poet and dramatist.

NAOMI ROYDE SMITH; novelist and critic; at one time literary editor of *The Westminster Gazette*.