

# MISSIONARY SPIRITUALITY OF ST. CHARLES DE FOUCAULD: THE SPIRIATULITY OF KENOSIS AND A CALL FOR UNIVERSAL FRIENDSHIP

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**ABSTRACT**

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This paper explores the missionary spirituality of St. Charles de Foucauld, emphasizing his embodiment of universal fraternity and his prophetic model of evangelization through presence, prayer, and fraternal witness. The primary aim is to examine how his life among Muslims and the marginalized in the Sahara presents a paradigm for contemporary interreligious dialogue and missionary outreach. By analyzing his memoir writings, historical context, and spiritual development—especially his principle of “double identification” with both Christ and the poor—the study highlights theology of *kenosis* that rooted in the hidden life of Jesus in Nazareth. This research argues that Foucauld’s witness remains relevant today, particularly in a world marked by religious plurality and socio-cultural fragmentation. The paper concludes that his spirituality offers a transformative vision for Christian mission: not through propaganda, but through humble presence, shared humanity, and communion with all as “universal brother.”

**METHODOLOGY**

This research employs a qualitative and theological-historical method, combining biographical analysis with theological reflection. Primary sources such as the writings, letters, and prayers of St. Charles de Foucauld are examined alongside official Church documents (e.g., *Nostra Aetate*, *Rerum Novarum*, *Evangelii Gaudium*, *Fratelli Tutti*, *Redemptoris Missio*) and scholarly interpretations to uncover key elements of his missionary spirituality. The research analyzes his life in its socio-historical context and reflects on how his spiritual practices and theological convictions inform contemporary approaches to mission and interreligious dialogue. It also draws on practical pastoral insights to connect Foucauld’s example with the lived experience of Christian mission today.

**Key Words:** Universal Fraternity, Missionary Spirituality, Interreligious Dialogue, Double Identification, friendship

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

In the book *All Saints* (2001), Robert Ellsberg provides a concise yet profound portrayal of St. Charles de Foucauld, emphasizing his radical commitment to universal brotherhood and his embodiment of a Christ-centered life among the marginalized. Ellsberg situates Foucauld within a broader communion of modern saints who lived out their faith through social witness and contemplative presence.

René Bazin’s *Charles de Foucauld: Hermit and Explorer* (1923) offers a detailed biographical account rooted in personal testimonies and historical accuracy, portraying Foucauld’s transformation from soldier and explorer to saint and hermit. Bazin highlights his interior struggle and gradual spiritual awakening, making the work a foundational source for understanding Foucauld’s missionary journey.

Reilly M. Collins’ *Spirituality for Mission* (1978) explores various models of missionary spirituality and includes Foucauld as a significant exemplar of contemplative engagement with the world. Collins presents Foucauld’s approach as a radical alternative to mission strategies based on proselytization, underscoring his emphasis on presence, simplicity, and solidarity.

Other significant sources include *Fratelli Tutti* (2020) by Pope Francis, which references Charles de Foucauld as a prophetic witness to the “culture of encounter” and universal love. The Second Vatican Council’s *Nostra Aetate* and *Ad Gentes* provide theological grounding for interreligious

dialogue and mission, both of which align closely with Foucauld's life and vision. Additionally, scholarly articles and missiological reflections such as Minlib Dallh, Stephen B. Bevans, Roger P. Schroeder, and Vic Kevin Ferrer further analyze the theological implications of Foucauld's "double identification" and his contribution to a spirituality of incarnation and intercultural engagement.

## RESEARCH RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### 1. Family background

Charles de Foucauld was born into an aristocratic Catholic family in Strasbourg on September 15, 1858. His mother was Élisabeth de Morlet. His father, Francois Edouard, Viscount de Foucauld de Pontbriand, Deputy-Inspector of Forests, belonged to an ancient and noble family of Perigord, which gave saints to the Church and outstanding servants to France. (Bazin, 1923,1)

Charles has a younger sister, Mary. During childhood, he was pious under the guidance of his mother, who taught them to join their hands to pray. Unfortunately, his parents died in 1864. He was orphaned at the age of six. His devout grandfather, Colonel Beaudet de Morlet, raised him. His grandfather was a retired colonel of Engineers, who was nearly seventy years of age. (Bazin, 1923,1)

He was sent to the Episcopal School of Saint Arbogast, managed by the priests of the Diocese of Strasbourg. Then the war between France and Prussia happened. The grandfather and his two children were driven to leave Alsace and sought refuge in Berne. In 1872, his grandfather was unable to return to Strasbourg and moved to live in Nancy. Gradually, Charles began losing the habit of regularity-ordered work and soon lost faith at the age of fourteen. Afterward, his life was marked by undisciplined pleasure-seeking.

In 1876, he joined the French military academy of Saint Cyr. Then, he had a career as an officer in North Africa but was dismissed in 1881 due to his scandalous behavior. (Ellsberg, 2001, 524)

### 2. Social-cultural background

French society was greatly impacted by the Revolution in 1789 and the Napoleonic Wars, which ended in 1815. In 1858, Napoleon III supported several of the Italian states that declared war on Austria. In 1870, the tensions between France and Prussia.

The development of science and technology made people pay more attention to secular affairs. Religion and Christianity also showed signs of separation from secular society. (Bevans and Schroeder, 2005, 207) This was also the period of independence of many Asian and African countries from Western countries, in which France also gradually lost its influence in its colonial countries.

In response to the new type of society, Pope Leo XIII wrote the Encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in 1891. This document of the Catholic Church was as a response to the Industrial Revolution, which had begun in the 18th century, and the rise of liberal and later Marxist economic theory.

The religious context of the Catholic Church at this time was marked, firstly, by a rise in new popular devotions around such as the Sacred Heart, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the Blessed Sacrament; secondly, by the renewal of older religious orders and the founding of many new ones, including many missionary orders of men and women. (Bevans and Schroeder, 2005, 208) Furthermore, the second half of the nineteenth century was also marked by many new religious societies of men and women dedicated to evangelizing Muslim countries in Africa.

### 3. Missionary life and work of Icon

Charles' life can be divided into two main periods: (1) the period during (1883-1886), under Abbé Huvelin's direction (1886-1890), Charles was a Trappist monk at Akbès in Syria (1890-1897) and then a hermit-handyman at the Convent of the Poor Clares in Nazareth (1897-1900); (2) the

time following his ordination in 1901 during which he worked in semi-solitude as a monk-missionary in the Sahara.

#### a. The first period (1883-1900)

The saving benefit from military service in the North African desert before that was a fascination to him. Thus, he went back there in 1883 under the aegis of the French Geographical Society to undertake a dangerous exploration of Morocco. The experience of Muslim piety prompted in Charles a dramatic recovery of his Catholic faith, changing his character and his life forever. He said, "I understood that I could not do anything other than live for him. My religious vocation dates from the same moment as my faith." (Ellsberg, 2001, 524)

After traveling to Morocco, he returned to France, where he continued his search for faith. In October 1886, he received his "second first Communion" and placed himself under the spiritual direction of Abbé Huvelin. He became a Trappist monk at Notre Dame des Neiges in France. From that time on, Charles was influenced by his conviction: "As soon as I believed there was a God, I knew I could not do otherwise than to live only for Him." (Collins, 1978, 112) Then, he accomplished a journey to the Holy Land, following Jesus' footsteps in the real town and region where he had traveled, which had a tremendous impact.

He spent seven years in a monastery in Syria. But conventional monastic life did not satisfy him. If there is one thing that impressed him, it was the fact that Jesus himself, the Son of God, had been a poor man. Actually, in the beginning, Charles set about trying to literally put this insight into practice through a life as a servant at a convent of Poor Clares in Nazareth itself for three years. However, eventually he realized that "Nazareth" might be any place.

#### b. In the second period (1901- 1916)

In 1901, with the solitude of the Trappists and his sojourn at Nazareth behind him, Charles was ordained priest. Afterward, the question of how to exercise his ministry was raised. At the same time, he saw some countries such as North Africa, Algeria, Morocco, Sudan, and the Sahara as a trust given to France for two purposes: to administer and civilize and to evangelize. Finally, he truly wanted to return to Algeria, in Beni Abbès.

In June 1903, the Bishop of the Sahara spent several days in Beni Abbès. He came from the South, where he had visited the Tuaregs of the Hoggar. Charles felt attracted by these people who lived in the heart of the desert. There were barely any available priests, so Charles volunteered to go there. There, he also melded his spirituality through the exercise of his ministry of Nazareth among the poorest and abandoned. He wanted to develop a new model of contemplative religious life, a community of Little Brothers who would live among the poor in a spirit of service and solidarity.

When Charles de Foucauld lived among the Tuareg people—a nomadic group in the Sahara—he dedicated himself to learning their language, translating the Scriptures into Tamahaq (the Tuareg language), and preserving their culture. His mission, however, was not driven by a desire to convert others, but rather by a profound longing for the will of God to be fulfilled in every human heart. Inspired by the hidden life of Jesus in Nazareth, Charles sought to embody a life of quiet witness, rooted in presence, humility, and love.

He embraced a deep sense of universal fraternity, living as a "brother to all," regardless of religion or race. Among his neighbors were Muslims and Jews, with whom he shared daily life in mutual respect and dialogue. He immersed himself in the study of Arabic and Hebrew, as well as local customs, not to dominate but to understand and serve. His commitment to the dignity of every person led him to rescue many slaves and help them rebuild their lives in freedom—an expression of his belief that every human being is a beloved child of God.

Despite his peaceful intentions, some suspected him of being a spy due to the occasional visits of French soldiers to his hermitage in Tamanrasset. Tragically, on December 1, 1916, he was

killed by rebel forces. Yet, his legacy endures—not in conquest or success, but in his radical witness to universal love, fraternity, and solidarity with the poorest and most forgotten.

#### **c The canonization process of Charles de Foucauld**

In 2001, Pope John Paul II moved Charles de Foucauld's sainthood cause forward by declaring him venerable. Pope Benedict XVI followed suit in 2005 by decreeing that the hermit died a martyr and approving his beatification. He was canonized on May 15, 2022, by Pope Francis. (Minlib, 2020, 133)

#### **4. Missionary spirituality of Charles de Foucauld**

His missionary spirituality is based on three principles: prayer and adoration, double identification, and witness. (Collins, 1978, 115)

The first is prayer and adoration. He felt that offering Mass and adoring the presence of Christ in the sacrament could not but have efficacious results among non-believers.

The second is double identification. He sought identification with the example set by Christ, poor and humble at Nazareth, and identification with the people by living Christ-like life among them, mastering their language and culture, and thus building up trust. In his famous prayer of Abandonment: "Father, I abandon myself in your hands, do with me what you will. For whatever you may do, I thank you. I am ready for all, I accept all, let only Your will be done in me, as in all Your creatures." (Ellsberg, 2001, 525)

The third is the witness. He wishes to proclaim the Gospel not with words but with one's whole life by living a life of prayer, penance, and evangelical charity so that non-believers could not but be attracted to Christianity. Foucauld wrote: "the whole of our existence, the whole of our lives should cry the Gospel from the rooftops...not by our words but by our lives."

Apparently, during the first period after his conversion, one principle in his spiritual life was the imitation of Christ. (Collins, 1978, 113) He was captured by the love of Christ, a love that could only show itself in perfect imitation through humility, poverty, and abandonment. However, gradually, he seems to have had no desire to engage in the apostolate. He developed another principle that was later dominated his missionary spirituality – total self-conversion must take place before any attempt is made to convert others. (Minlib, 2020, 133) Therefore, it has been suggested that "Foucauld does not follow the traditional pattern of Western spirituality; rather, his asceticism is of the more kenotic type found in the Greek and Russian tradition." (Fremantle, 1950, 171)

During his time in ministry in North Africa, Charles de Foucauld began to show a greater concern for saving souls. However, converts were not his immediate aim. He realized that the Muslim people of North Africa were not ready for this step because of their lack of "civilization", and culture and education affected by Islam. Consequently, he wanted to evangelize through presence, the presence of Christ in the Mass and Sacrament, and the presence of Christ in the life of the missionary. Following his view, only after the ground had been prepared adequately through these ways should the preaching and teaching congregations, such as the Salesians, Jesuits, or Dominicans, begin the actual work of direct evangelization and conversion. (Gorrée, 1938, 74-75) Thus, the faithful in all lands were called to witness their lives so that non-believers would be won for Christ.

A short brief testament that summarizes his spirituality:

*"Jesus came to Nazareth, the place of the hidden life, of ordinary life, of family life, of prayer, work, obscurity, silent virtues, practiced with no witness other than God, his friends and his neighbors. Nazareth the place where most people lead their lives. We must infinitely respect the least of our brothers...let us mingle with them. Let us be one of them to the extent that God wishes...and treat them fraternally in order to have the honor and joy of being accepted as one of them."* (Ellsberg, 2001, 525)

Charles de Foucauld's missionary spirituality reflects the so-called theology of *kenosis*, or self-emptying, profoundly shapes his life during the time was in Sahara Desert. It rests on his prayers and practices adoration, double identification, and silent witness. His imitation of Christ—poor, humble, and obedient—reflects a *kenosis* love expressed through abandonment to the Father's will and total solidarity with the marginalized, as seen in his life among the Tuareg. Rather than aiming for immediate conversions, Foucauld believed that the presence of Christ in the Eucharist and in the self-sacrificing life of the missionary would gradually prepare hearts for the Gospel. So that, his spirituality thus echoes the Eastern *kenosis* tradition, that embodies humility, presence, and universal friendship as a path to authentic evangelization.

## 5. The relevance of missionary spirituality of St. Charles De Foucauld for today

Saint Charles' solitary witness achieved considerable effect. In 1933, Rene Voillaume and four companions left France for the Sahara. They became the core of the Little Brothers of Jesus. Several years later, they expanded further, joining the Little Sisters of Jesus. Both fraternities gradually spread throughout the world. Their members lived among the poor and outcasts in the desert Sahara, gradually appearing in many areas on the world. Up to now, there are nineteen different congregations and associations in the Foucauldian spiritual family. (Minlib, 2020, 139)

He died alone. In the end, his life seemed like a failure, but his figure became the most influential in modern times. Charles was responsible for reviving the tradition of desert spirituality in our time. Rather a retreat from humanity, he believed that being alone with God enabled us to fully encounter and love our neighbors as ourselves.

His prayers on behalf of the Tuaregs, particularly towards the end of his life, were to prepare them for conversion. Foucauld volunteered to become a brother among Muslim brothers, living with them, and praying for them. He came to them not as a conquerer but as a humble brother. He is considered one of the pioneers of interreligious dialogue. He exemplified an evangelization of an encounter with people of other faiths based on mutual respect and equality through dialogue. Thus, "each member of the faithful and all Christian communities are called to practice dialogue" (*Redemptorist Missio*, 57). Since the Church has no reject the values in other religions. (See *Nostra Aetate*, 2)

In a modern world where Christianity is in the minority among nations, a world of diaspora, Christianity needs spiritual inspiration through living witness. A Christian missionary living the Gospel in accordance with Charles de Foucauld's spirituality might be a highly successful method of promoting Christ's presence as a sign of the divinely inspired possibility that is still realizable in fully Christian and fully human life. (Collins, 1978, 116)

His spirituality represents a return to very ancient approaches to mission spirituality and, in other ways, might point out future directions. Saint Charles wanted to evangelize not only through the Word but through the presence and a fraternal community built with universal love. His spirit then inspired Pope Francis. Typically, in *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis promotes a "culture of encounter". It is a term he has used in reference to Charles de Foucauld at the end of his encyclical. He identified him as someone who attempted to communicate this culture of encounter by his own life. "Blessed Charles directed his ideal of total surrender to God towards identification with the poor, abandoned in the depths of the African desert. In that setting, he expressed his desire to make himself a brother to every human being and asked a friend to 'pray to God that I will truly be the brother of all.' He wanted to be, in the end, 'the universal brother.' Yet only by identifying with the least did he come at last to be the brother of all." (*Fratelli Tutti*, 287)

The principle called "Double identification" was built into Charles's life. This principle is considered similar to the ideal of Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*. Pope Francis wants to urge pastors: "Evangelizers thus take on the 'smell of the sheep' and the sheep are willing to hear their voice." (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 24)

## 6. An Inspirational Figure



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Saint Charles de Foucauld lived a life of prayer, meditation, and adoration in the incessant desire to be, for each person, a “universal brother,” a living image of the love of Jesus, (Vatican News, 2021) and as a brother among brothers regardless of race, color, or social class. Once becoming a brother with other religions, Christian can become a builder of the fraternal community with respect for others and equality through engaging in interreligious dialogue.

Saint Charles was joyful in his mission, his joy flowing from his life with God. Today, many young people male and female as well were inspired by him and encouraged to create a joyful community in which the joy from encountering God is first and is inseparable later in others. As Pope Francis hopes that each Christian will be inspired by this saint, who lost his Catholic faith as a teenager but regained it through the devotion of individuals of other religions. (Ferrer, 2020)

For all people of different religions, the life of Charles is a true story of a genuine and deep friendship with someone living near him. Typically, friendship with brothers and sisters belonging to other religions is established from simple deeds or humble behavior. Friendship is established from simple deeds or humble behavior.

For evangelizers, as in charge of pastors, are called to be “shepherds with the ‘smell of the sheep’”. In the context of the parish, as a priest, I must be possessed the smell of Jesus Christ’s holiness and have a compassionate love for the suffering of all people in the parish, whether Christian or not. In other words, he realizes the face of God not only in prayers and contemplation but also in the strange faces of God in those who are suffering, victims, and abandoned people.

For mystics or contemplative people, the journey in the desert of Saint Charles is also the journey of discovering the face of Jesus of Nazareth. This desire happened within himself and urged by Jesus’ dynamic as he said, “I seek to imitate him”. However, it was a search that took time, moving step by step and finding things gradually. At every moment, Saint Charles make attempts to comprehend who “Jesus of the Nazareth” is like. Therefore, this experience builds consciousness in those who enter the contemplative life or are candidates in the formation period, realizing the journey of personal spirituality of a missionary is the unending journey to discover the face of Jesus in daily life.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, the missionary spirituality of Charles de Foucauld reveals a profound identification with Christ and with the suffering world, shaped by humility, simplicity, and presence. His radical approach challenges modern mission to embrace vulnerability and solidarity rather than power or security. As he once said, “I no longer want a monastery which is too secure. I want a small monastery, like the house of a poor workman who is not sure if tomorrow he will find work and bread, who with all his being shares the suffering of the world.” (Ellsberg, 2001, 524)

*Foster Interreligious Dialogue:* Inspired by Foucauld’s respectful engagement with Islam and other faiths, missionaries should build friendships across religious boundaries through mutual respect, cultural learning, and shared human concerns.

*Embrace Simplicity and Solidarity:* Missionaries are encouraged to live simply, in solidarity with the poor and marginalized, modeling Christ’s own life of poverty and service in Nazareth.

*Form ‘Fraternal Communities’:* Churches and religious groups should consider forming small, local, and relational communities that live the Gospel quietly yet powerfully, just as Foucauld envisioned.

*Cultivate Contemplative life:* The integration of deep prayer and active love should guide every missionary endeavor, ensuring that external action flows from interior transformation.

*Promote Universal Friendship:* Church leaders and missionaries should actively foster a spirituality of universal brotherhood, creating spaces of inclusion and love among brothers and

sisters of other religious traditions, especially those who feel excluded or forgotten by society or the Church.

#### ADVANCED RESEARCH

Further research should explore how Charles de Foucauld's spirituality of presence and universal friendship can inform contemporary models of intercultural and interreligious mission, particularly in contexts marked by marginalization and religious tension. Comparative theological studies could examine parallels between Foucauld's approach and non-Christian traditions of contemplative solidarity. Further empirical research may analyze the impact of missionary communities that embody simplicity, shared poverty, and relational witness in pluralistic societies. Finally, interdisciplinary work combining missiology, sociology, and spirituality can help reimagine the Church's mission as a dynamic expression of universal brotherhood in an increasingly fragmented world.

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