



Allocutio



PRAESENTATA CURIA

Allocution July 28, 2016

Blessed Charles de Foucauld

This year is the 100th Anniversary of Blessed Charles de Foucauld who died at the hands of rebels in the Southern Sahara of Algeria. I thought I'd say a few words about him because in some ways he reminds me of Frank Duff.

Very briefly he was born into a French military family of aristocratic stock. His parents died when he was 6 and an over-benevolent grandfather took him over and spoiled him. He lost his faith and indulged himself in the pleasures of life. He joined the French Foreign Legion but so decadent was he that they fired him. He went back to Africa and opted for a year of doing research in Morocco where the faith of the Moslems impressed him and he began to have a reawakening of faith. His cousin Marie listened to his search and led him to a priest who heard his confession and he changed completely. He wanted from now on to live the hidden life of Nazareth. He began with the Trappists but ended up in the deep Sahara.

At many levels his life was completely different from Frank Duff's but his thinking was so alike it. For example, he believed in the utter importance of the role of the laity. "It is certain that working alongside priests there needs to be Priscillas and Aquilas (Acts 18:2 etc.) who can see what the priest does not see, go where the priest cannot go. They can reach those who escape the priest and evangelise them by a contact that does them good, by a kindness that overflows to all, a love always ready to give itself, a good example attracting those who turn their backs on the priest and are hostile to him". Sounds very familiar, does it not?

He lived among the Moslem people of the South Sahara because he wanted to go to the lowest place. But his strategy there I will now outline. He said, "Charity, which is the heart of religion ... obliges all Christians to love our neighbour, meaning every human being, as themselves and consequently to



Allocutio



make their neighbours salvation, like their own, the great aim of their lives. Every Christian therefore must be an apostle. This is not a counsel; it is a commandment, the commandment of charity. “

In that too he sounds like Frank Duff who saw charity as the motive that should bring us in contact with souls.

“Lay people must be apostles towards all those they can reach, their relations and their friends first of all, but not only these. There is nothing narrow about charity. Its scope is as wide as the dimensions of the heart of Jesus.

“How can we be an apostle? With anyone they are in touch with, making no exceptions, they must work by goodness, friendliness, the example of virtue, by humility and mildness, always such attractive and Christian attitudes.

“With some people they should never say a word about God or religion but wait patiently as God waits patiently, be good as God is good, show respectful affection and pray. With others they should speak of God to the extent that they are ready for it.

His own experience had been one of abandoning his faith and finding it again. One person who helped him was Marie de Bondi who, a loving believer, stayed close to him, made him welcome always, listened to him and never got at him. But when faith arose again in his heart he went straight to her for help. It was her love and kindness and welcome to him always won her as his closest ally. He learnt from her methods.

Later when talking about his approach with the Moslems he says “I’m not to talk to them directly about our Lord. That would just make them go away. I’m to gain their confidence, make friends with them, so them little services, deepen a friendship between us and encourage them ...” He did want them to come to see God as Father and all of us as brothers and sisters. But he wanted to show them that in action first.

He wrote once, “My apostolate should be one of goodness. When people see me they should say, ‘If this man is good, his religion must be good!’” “If someone asks me why I am mild and good I should say, ‘Because I am the



Allocutio



servant of someone much better than I am. If only you knew how good my Master Jesus is!”

Before he went to Africa as a missionary he lived a while in Nazareth and there he reports a meditation he had on the visitation. He attributes these words to Jesus, “I had hardly taken flesh when I asked my Mother to carry me to the house where John was to be born. Before I was even born myself I was at work on the sanctification of the human race, and I prompted my Mother to work with me. And to all other people to whom I give myself I say: Work with me as my Mother did, without words in silence in the midst of people who do not know me. Carry me among them by setting up an altar there, a tabernacle. Take the Gospel there by not preaching it with your lips but preaching it with your example, not by proclaiming it but by living it. Our whole existence, our whole being, should cry the Gospel from the rooftops. Our whole personality should spell Jesus: all our acts, all our life should proclaim that we belong to Jesus and show a mirror of Gospel life!”

He died having converted no one except the local Moslem chief said he looked forward to meeting him in paradise, an extraordinary statement for a Muslim. Perhaps too he did not quite see the role of Mary as Frank Duff did except he saw that we have to be like Mary in bringing Jesus to others in all ways we can.

I just wonder if that is what Fr Jacques Hamel did, namely bore such witness by his outreach to other Moslems that he deeply disturbed the minds of those whose ideas of Christians he didn't fit. If so he was a true martyr, not just at the level of words but at the level of witness.