



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II TO BISHOP

To Bishop François Blondel of Viviers

1. On the occasion of the colloquium organized in Viviers to celebrate the centenary of Fr Charles de Foucauld's ordination to the priesthood, I gladly join its organizers and all the participants through prayer. I give thanks for the witness of contemplative and apostolic life of the humble, poor hermit of Hoggar, who was set on following Jesus of Nazareth. Today Bro. Charles invites all the faithful to draw from the contemplation of Christ and a deep relationship with him, new strength to nourish their spiritual life and to proclaim the Gospel to the people of our time; thus they will become the servants of the meeting between God and humanity, called to salvation.

2. *"Fr de Foucauld ... belongs to us through the most memorable act of his existence and the best part of his life... He became a priest"* (Bishop Bonnet, *Lettre du 28 mai 1917*). On 9 June 1901 at the age of 43, after a period of formation with the Trappists of Notre-Dame-des-Neiges, Bro. Charles was ordained a priest by your predecessor, Bishop Joseph Bonnet, in the chapel of the major seminary of Viviers. This ordination, which conformed him to Christ, Head and Shepherd, and made him his minister, designated a further turning point in his "hidden life" with the Lord. From that day in October 1886, when he rediscovered recourse to the Eucharist through the grace of the sacrament of reconciliation and the ministry of Fr Huvelin, until his assassination in December 1916 throughout his life he was to express only one desire: to remain the seed buried in the earth and to die, offering his life in silent imitation of Jesus Christ who loved all men "to the end" (Jn 13,1), to be close to them.

3. In the Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio ineunte*, I recalled that contemplation of Christ is the source of the Church's missionary dynamism. This contemplation was the basis of Bro. Charles' spiritual life and apostolic fruitfulness, and it gave his life a distinctly Eucharistic tone. The pastoral charity of Jesus Christ, his beloved Brother and Lord, received in daily life through meditation upon his word and through the Sacrament of his Real Presence, prompted him to share the life of the Holy Family in Nazareth, so as to be closer to his Master. It was at the Trappist monastery of

Akbès and later in Nazareth that he had a profound experience of the mystery of the Incarnation which he described in the words of Scripture: "'Emmanuel, God-with-us', these are, as it were, the first words of the Gospel.... 'I am with you until the end of time', these are the last" (*La bonté de Dieu, méditations sur les saints Evangiles*, 147th meditation).

4. "My final retreats for the diaconate and the priesthood have shown me that that I was to live the life of Nazareth, my vocation, not in my beloved Holy Land, but among the souls who are the sickest, the most forsaken sheep. This divine banquet, whose minister I am, must not be set before my brethren, relatives or rich neighbours, but before those who are the lamest, the blindest, the most neglected souls, who have no priests" (*Lettre du 8 avril 1905 à L'Abbé Caron*). This special charismatic intuition reveals the pastoral, ecclesial and missionary sense of the person known as the "Universal Brother!". During the last 15 years of his life, in Béni-Abbès and in Tamanrasset, remaining for hours in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament in the silence of the desert, Fr Charles de Foucauld presented God to the world and humbly helped to spread the Good News of salvation, thus faithfully fulfilling his priestly mission.

5. As I give thanks for the witness of Fr de Foucauld, I encourage all who are inspired by his charism today to continue their apostolate in an ever greater unity of the different institutes, and to follow his message and example with generosity and daring. At the beginning of the new millennium, "now is the time for a new "creativity in charity" (*Novo Millennio ineunte*, n. 50) which is asked of the members of the Foucauld family, especially in countries where cultural and religious tensions exist between communities, in countries where people are subject to difficult living conditions, and alongside the many poor people of modern society. Faithful to the Eucharist, they will be close to every man and woman, and able to love as Jesus loved. Faithful to their commitment to the poor, they will bear witness to God's love, filling "history with the seeds of the kingdom of God which Jesus himself sowed during his earthly life whenever he responded to those who came to him with their spiritual and material needs" (*ibid.*, n. 49).

Is not Bro. Charles, who learned the language of the Tuaregs to translate the Gospels and compiled a dictionary and a grammar for them, calling those inspired by his charism to enter into dialogue with contemporary cultures and take the route that leads to meeting other religious traditions, especially Islam? Thus the different religious communities will truly be "as communities in respectful dialogue, never more as communities in conflict" (*Address at the Umayyad Great Mosque of Damascus*, Syria, 6 May 2001). I hope that the spiritual insights of Fr Charles de Foucauld will continue to enrich the Church's life, thereby witnessing that love is stronger than all forms of tension and division.

6. Dear Brother in the Episcopate, I entrust the Diocese of Viviers and the whole of the large Foucauld family to the intercession of Venerable Charles de Foucauld, whose heroic virtues have recently been recognized by the Church. I cordially impart an affectionate Apostolic Blessing to you, to the members of your dioceses, to the Trappist community of Notre-Dame-des-Neiges, to

the family of Charles de Foucauld and the institutes that live his charism, and to the organizers and participants in the colloquium.

From the Vatican, 26 May 2001

JOHN PAUL II

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