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TIME AND THE MYSTERY OF A SOUL

Some years ago, because I had allowed my own use of time to become completely disordered, I wrote a book on that subject.¹ Some of the things I learned in the process shape how I interpret Foucauld's biography and thus lead me to open this chapter with a little reminder about the Christian theology of time.

For Christians, time is theologically important because God chose to enter it in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. In that act, time became the locus of eternity. St. Paul put it this way: "When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman . . ." (Gal 4:4). The Greek word "fullness" (*pleroma*) means "filled up" or "perfected," thus "when the time was perfected," or "when the exact right moment arrived." This

suggests that there are two kinds of time: ordinary time and “fullness time,” historical time and time which contains special meaning.

Theology calls these two kinds of time *chronos* and *kairos*. *Chronos* is beginning, middle, and end time; it is “ordinary” time—the march of history we sometimes call chronology. *Kairos* is a particular moment of time, *the* moment filled with meaning and possibility. Perhaps we could say that when its meaning is recognized, *chronos* becomes *kairos* because, in fact, all our moments of time are *kairos* if properly understood. But for most of us, life has both chronology and kariology: events and biographical progression and the meaning of those events and progressions. As we mature spiritually, we come to understand that all of our lives are our *kairos*, that, as Bishop Desmond Tutu put it, “your whole life is holy ground.”² The challenge is to learn to “see” time with baptized eyes.

Writing in *The Rambler* on October 13, 1750, the great English essayist and lexicographer, Dr. Samuel Johnson, mused, “I have often thought that there has rarely passed a life of which a judicious and faithful narrative would not be useful.”³ This, Dr. Johnson believes, is because “we are all prompted by the same motives, all deceived by the same fallacies, all animated by hope, obstructed by danger, entangled by desire, and seduced by pleasure.”⁴ There is a uniformity in the human condition which Dr. Johnson finds edifying. He, too, suggests that each life has *chronos* (a narrative) and *kairos* (its meaning). Mine does and so does yours.

Chapter 1 of this book provides a case in point of Dr. Johnson’s insight by sketching in broad strokes the life of

Charles de Foucauld. It is not intended to be a comprehensive biography, but to give you the context out of which Foucauld's understanding of Jesus' life emerged. I first treat the *chronos* or biographical "facts" of his life and then suggest something of their *kairos* or meaning. To help you follow the *chronos*, there is a timeline of Foucauld's life on page 123. I hope this sketch reflects the truth articulated by Foucauld's biographer René Bazin, with which this book began: "Every soul is more or less a secret to others. The mystery is greater when souls are great, when they turn aside from our pleasures and work . . . and when they give themselves to God."⁵

A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF CHARLES'S LIFE (*CHRONOS* TIME)

EARLY LIFE AND EDUCATION 1858–1879

Foucauld was born into an aristocratic family in Strasbourg on September 15, 1858, and he was orphaned as a child. His father died of tuberculosis in 1863 and his mother of a miscarriage in 1864. To suggest the religious context of his early life, some biographers note that her last words were, "Thy will, not mine be done." Charles was raised by loving, indulgent, and pious grandparents and made his First Communion on April 18, 1872.

The story of his excellent educational opportunities is that of a downward spiral. (Some of you may identify!)

He attended *lycee* in Nancy and entered the Jesuit Ecole St. Genevieve in Paris in 1874. He sat for the second part of his baccalaureate in 1875 before being sent away by the Jesuits for "laziness and disobedience."⁶ In March of 1876, he wrote of boarding school, "I found it detestable."⁷

His grandfather, a retired colonel, hoped that Charles would continue the family's military tradition and in 1876 sent him to St. Cyr, the military academy near Versailles. He entered eighty-second in a class of 412, although he was nearly rejected for being overweight. According to Robert Ellsberg's collection of Foucauld's writings, "in years to come . . . he would be affectionately known by his comrades in the elite officer corps as 'Piggy.'"⁸ He graduated in 1878, the year he came into possession of his fortune, 333rd in a class of 386, and in October he entered the cavalry school at Saumur. The inspector general of that school described him as "a remarkable person . . . with no thought for anything except entertainment."⁹

In his biographies, the descriptions of Foucauld's life as an officer in training, especially at Saumur, do not make edifying reading. Antier reports that he "had a total of twenty-one days of open arrest and forty-five days of closed arrest, for a variety of offenses: poor work, incorrect dress, tardiness, failure to follow orders, unexcused absences."¹⁰ Biographers disagree upon whether he finished eighty-sixth or eighty-seventh in his class of eighty-seven. It was not a stellar performance.

MILITARY CAREER AND EXPLORER IN NORTH AFRICA 1879–1885

Second Lieutenant Foucauld was assigned to the Fourth Hussars, Pont-a-Mousson, but kept a studio on Rue La Boétie in Paris. He took a mistress and moved her into his apartment in Pont-a-Mousson, but he did not entertain her in the family home in Nancy. When his unit was transferred to Algeria, he took her with him, passing her off as his wife, much to the chagrin of the legitimate families. As a result, he was placed on inactive status “for actions unbefitting his rank, for breach of discipline, and for unbecoming conduct in public.”¹¹ Lt. Foucauld and his mistress moved to Evian, where Charles continued to fritter away his considerable inheritance.

However, when he learned that his regiment was being posted to Tunisia to put down a revolt, he requested to be reinstated in the army and was assigned to the Fourth Chasseurs. He bid his mistress *adieu*, and on June 20, 1881, he sailed for Oran. There, in North Africa, his conversion began in the midst of active duty pursuing “rebels” in Algeria and Morocco. He proved to be a good officer in battle, but when the unit returned to its garrison in Mascara in January 1882, things again began to unravel. By the end of January, he had resigned his commission and a judiciary council took control of his estate.

Something extraordinary had happened to him during his time in North Africa: he met the silence of the desert and the faith of the Muslims. He also developed a taste for exploration and began to plan an expedition to the interior

of Morocco, which was at the time largely unknown and uncharted. In order to do so, he assumed the disguise of a wandering Jew and hired Mardochee Abi Serour, a rabbi and peddler, to accompany him. From June 1883 to May 1884, the two journeyed through Morocco with Foucauld secretly recording in a tiny notebook the geographical coordinates, natural history, and local customs of the people.¹² As a result of this astonishing journey, in 1884 he was inducted into the Geographical Society of Paris, and in January 1885 he received its gold medal. The Sorbonne honored him, and his observations were the basis of his book *Reconnaissance au Maroc*, which, when published in 1888, continued his celebrity.

Thrilling as the journey was, and as useful as it was to France, its enduring importance was its effect on the soul of Charles de Foucauld. His biographers are in agreement that, in the words of Lorit, "God . . . had used the faith of the followers of Mohammed to make his first breakthrough to the soul of Charles de Foucauld."¹³ Through what he observed of the faithful practice of the simple Muslims among whom he travelled, Islam (or perhaps *Allah*, the Arabic word for God) got into his blood. The great Islamic scholar and Christian mystic Louis Massignon (who over the years received some eighty letters from Foucauld) thought Foucauld's association with the Jews and Muslims, for whom faith was a living reality, profoundly changed him.¹⁴

Foucauld himself noted that the *hadji* (those Muslims who had made the pilgrimage to Mecca) were kinder than ordinary people. He was intrigued by Islamic beliefs like that of the *leila el gedr*, the mysterious night when heaven opens

and the whole creation worships God. The biographer Anne Fremantle notes perceptively that while a long way from faith, Foucauld had experienced wonder and “through the study of an alien religion . . . he had come to his first mention of his Creator.”¹⁵ Foucauld himself wrote, “My exposure to this faith [Islam] and to the soul living always in God’s presence helped me understand that there is something greater and more real than the pleasures of this world.”¹⁶

Charles de Foucauld was not only a pioneer in the mapping of Morocco, but also a pioneer in Islamic-Christian dialogue, one whose insights are sorely neglected and needed in our own day. Rather than assuming the “other” was enemy, Foucauld was open to sincere piety where he found it. The ordinary Muslims’ worship of God—the worship of those thousands of believers who are neither extremists nor terrorists—initiated a process of *metanoia* (literally, “turning around”) in a lapsed Christian. We shall return to this later, but it is worth noting that a physician who knew Foucauld reported that he had said, “I am sure that the Good Lord will welcome into Heaven all those who have been good and honest without them having to be Roman Catholic.”¹⁷ In this, he foreshadowed the pronouncements of Vatican II in the document *Nostra Aetate*.

CONVERSION AND MONASTIC LIFE 1885–1901

Following a brief engagement to the daughter of the French Commandant at Algiers, Foucauld settled in Paris to public

acclaim (and the relief of his family) in 1886, the year of his return to the Church. I briefly told the story of his return in the introduction to this book. Foucauld prayed a nearly perfect prayer for a seeker, "God if you exist, make me know you." This brief and simple prayer acknowledges both uncertainty (with the conditional "if") and God's initiative and ability to bring about faith (with the imperative "make me"). "Know," of course, is the biblical way to describe not just intellectual knowledge but complete holistic understanding as well. The prayer is one anyone can pray in times of uncertainty, and one we can offer to others in spiritual indecision.

In late October 1886, Foucauld wisely sought spiritual counsel from Abbe Huvelin, who (perhaps playing on the training of a soldier) commanded him to make his Confession and receive Communion. And in that moment, his religious vocation was born. Later, he wrote of the experience, "My religious vocation was born at the same instant as my faith."¹⁸ "As soon as I believed there was a God, I knew I could not do otherwise than to live only for Him. God is so Great!"¹⁹ Foucauld echoes what he had heard so often in North Africa: *Allahu akhbar!* God is great; the cry of the *muzzenin* calling the Muslim community to prayer and the root confession of Islamic prayer and spirituality.

As it does for many who surrender to God's summons, the specifics of his religious vocation took time to develop. In August 1888, a visit to his family included a trip to the Trappist monastery of Fontgombault that proved decisive. In 1889, the year he was again allowed legal access to his fortune, he made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, visiting

Jerusalem and environs, Bethlehem, and Nazareth (to which he was to return). In January 1890, he went to Our Lady of the Snows near Vivarais in the Ardeche, the poorest of the Trappist communities, but one which had a house in Syria. Of this he wrote: "Everyone knows that love has for its first effect imitation; therefore, I had to enter that order where I would find the most exact imitation of Jesus. I did not feel I was intended to imitate His public life of preaching; I, therefore, must imitate the hidden life of the poor and humble workman of Nazareth."²⁰

In February of 1890, Charles de Foucauld—nobleman, French military officer, and celebrated explorer—became Br. Alberic and in June 1890, having given his considerable estate to his sister, was sent to "Our Lady of the Sacred Heart," the Trappist's Syrian house near Akbes. On February 2, 1892 (Feast of the Presentation/Candlemass), he made simple profession and began theological studies. Foucauld's life as a Trappist can be explored in detail elsewhere.²¹ Let two anecdotes suffice here. Even though he had been ill from November of 1892 to January of 1893, Foucauld was horrified when in that year Pope Leo XIII gave the Trappists permission to use butter and oil. (The austerities he, himself, could endure were so severe that Abbe Huvelin, who remained his spiritual director, constantly discouraged him from writing a rule of life that would include others.) In Akbes in 1895, the monks were protected by Turkish troops who were massacring Armenian Christians. Foucauld, himself a trained soldier, was horrified and outraged.

Although it was not his desire, in 1896, he was sent to Rome to study theology, thus living out his own dictum, "Bear your cross, not *the* cross, but yours, not the one you would like to choose, but your own."²² Having been obedient to his Trappist superiors, and approaching the end of his fifth year as a Trappist, Foucauld had to decide whether to take final vows. He did not find his monastic life close enough to that of "the poor, humble working man of Nazareth." Therefore, in January 1897, the Trappist general confirmed his own sense of his "Nazareth vocation," and he left the monastery.

Brother Alberic returned to the Holy Land in February 1897, and from February 24 to March 5 or 6, he walked from Jaffa to Nazareth, where on March 10 he was allowed by Mother St. Charles, Abbess of the Poor Clares, to become their handyman. He later said of that first year with the Poor Clares that it was the happiest of his life.²³ He lived in a hut in the garden, and when he was not working, he spent his time in adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and reading scripture as well as the writings of St. John Chrysostom, St. John of the Cross, and St. Teresa of Avila. Accounts of his life in Nazareth are deeply moving, and his holiness (and unusual demeanor for a beggar) did not go unnoticed. In 1898, Mother St. Charles sent him to Mother Elizabeth in Jerusalem to whom on Christmas Day of that year he made a vow of enclosure.

In March 1899 he returned to Nazareth, but his enclosure was relatively short lived. In the late summer of 1900, at the urging of the two women religious superiors who perhaps hoped Foucauld would become a community chaplain, he returned to Our Lady of the Snows in France to resume

preparation for ordination. He received minor orders from the abbot on October 7, 1900, was ordained deacon on March 23, 1901, in Nimes, and was ordained a priest on June 9, 1901, in the cathedral in Viviers. Fr. Huvelin advised him to remain at Our Lady of the Snows for another year. But Charles was determined to go where the need for priests was greatest, and this, he felt, was the North African Sahara. He desired to take Jesus to the Muslims who had returned him to God. When Huvelin relented, and with glowing letters of recommendation from his French supporters, Foucauld sailed for North Africa on September 6, 1901. According to Antier, "Not a single Catholic priest resided in Morocco. The White Fathers were established in northern Algeria, but none of them crossed the parallel of Ghardaia . . . the threshold of the Sahara."²⁴

ALGERIA, MOROCCO, AND MARTYRDOM 1901–1916

For the remaining fifteen years of his life, Fr. Foucauld served the French legions and the Muslim tribes of North Africa. He first lived at Béni Abbès, Algeria, an oasis that was at a crossroad of Algeria, Morocco, and the desert, offering his first Mass there on December 1, 1901. He was the only priest, and often the only Christian, for 250 miles. Although initially he lived largely as a hermit engaged in prayer and meditation, he served the French military as priest and began to redeem slaves by purchasing them and giving them freedom. The last of these was Paul Embarek, who became Foucauld's lifelong