

# “Imitation of Christ as a Christian Lifestyle—Disembodied Fiction or Incarnated Reality?” : Reflections on the Life of Charles de Foucauld

PHILIP N. HILLYER\*

## I Introduction

The question as to whether or not the moral life of the Christian can be rightly or usefully understood and pursued as an *imitatio Christi* has begun to receive more attention in recent years from both Catholic and Protestant writers. In the former case, the doctrine is no longer treated as the sole concern of pastoral theology and ascetical spirituality, and in the latter case exegetical study of the New Testament has indicated that the theme demands more consideration than instinctive judgements of pelagianism or moralism have generally allowed. Two other developments may be noted. In the first place, consideration of the extensive Catholic tradition and the more fragmentary but nevertheless significant espousal of the *imitatio Christi* in Protestant spirituality has also suggested that the importance of this doctrine has been underrated. Secondly, and perhaps in the long run more significantly, developmental psychology is making us more aware of the fundamental place of imitation in normal human growth towards maturity.

### *One Question: Many Questions*

“Imitation” is a complex phenomenon which cannot be treated on its own, for whether it is considered from a theological, ethical or psychological outlook, its meaning and value derive from the context in which it is placed. In each case it can be understood both negatively and positively, as something to be avoided or as something to be encouraged, which makes the recommendation of the *imitatio Christi* as a way of life a matter requiring careful argument and clear definition. In this article, however, only one question is being considered: granted that all *a priori* psychological, ethical, theological and exegetical problems have been dealt with,<sup>1</sup> is it possible to say that the *imitatio Christi* is a valid goal for the Christian?

\* Dr Hillyer teaches Theology at Bishop's College, Calcutta.

<sup>1</sup> These topics seem to have attracted little study as a unity. I have attempted to collect and relate individual discussions in the first part of my unpublished doctoral thesis, “The *imitatio Christi* in the spirituality of Charles de Foucauld” (University of Edinburgh, 1979).

Yet although we have reduced the field of enquiry to one question, it will be immediately apparent that to come to a satisfactory answer to it, several other questions must be asked and answered. Can we have a clear understanding of this aim to imitate Christ, or do we find ourselves coming to one or other of the following conclusions? Does close examination of our interpretation of his life convince us that our understanding is so overlaid with traditions accumulated within the Church's life and even in our own, that we feel that a true picture is unobtainable? Or do we say that such a picture, even if obtainable (can fact *ever* be separated from interpretation?), would be a useless and a dangerous abstraction from both the theological and psychological point of view? In other words, is our interpretation of the life of Christ so particular and culture and time-bound that if it is not hopelessly distorted, it is still irrelevant for today? Or is our understanding so general that there is not much more set before us for imitation than an inspiring idea? But could there be a third possibility? Is it possible to avoid the disembodied fiction and draw on an incarnated reality in such a way as to make this real in our own time and situation?

Such questions must be faced not only by individuals, but also by communities which understand their life as an *imitatio Christi*. In India, this is especially true of Christian ashrams, both of particular foundations which have made explicit or implicit avowal of this goal, and of the ashram movement in general which has from time to time endorsed this description of its life.

Would, for example, the short-lived "Brotherhood of the Imitation of Jesus" (1910-1911) have been able to live up to its founders' ideals of primitive purity and Franciscan poverty, and the aim to be both beyond culture and in culture? Or was C. F. Andrews merely confused in hoping that the Brothers would be able "to empty ourselves of the West, to be the citizens of no country, but Christians pure and simple, like the first disciples,"<sup>2</sup> and his aim to revive the Indian ashram tradition on educational grounds laudable only on this basis?

Again, considering the many elements which have gone into the making of ashrams—both the earlier Protestant, nationalist, Gandhian, Franciscan active type, and the later Catholic, neo-Hindu, Benedictine ones of a more contemplative outlook<sup>3</sup>—what place does any idea of *imitatio Christi* have in all this?

Lastly, both from the point of view of self-understanding, and with regard to dialogue with members of other faiths, it is necessary to face further questions. How does the *imitatio Christi* approach

<sup>2</sup> B. Chaturvedi and M. Sykes, *Charles Freer Andrews* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1949), p. 73.

<sup>3</sup> R. W. Taylor, "From Khadi to Kavi: toward a typology of Christian Ashrams," *Religion and Society*, XXIV, No. 4 (1977), pp. 19-37.

compare with the guru tradition in Hinduism and Sikhism, or with the imitation of Muhammed in Islam?<sup>4</sup>

One way to answer these questions would be to make an exhaustive study of the history of an ashram and trace the relationship between its Rule and its day to day life, another is to turn from India to Africa, to turn from an actual community to the would-be founder of a community. For, strange as it may seem, the most rigorous and illuminating application of the principle of *imitatio Christi* in modern times is to be found in Charles de Foucauld, who was not to see any followers in his life-time. But in the development of his Rule in the light of his own experience, we can see, if not its full significance in the life of a community, at least indications of how the *imitatio Christi* can take its place amongst other guides to action.

### *From the General to the Particular: Yet More Questions*

Charles de Foucauld is a complex and enigmatic figure who has defeated the efforts of most of his biographers to comprehend the many facets of his life and work.<sup>5</sup> There is abundant material to chart the development of his "inner life" of devotion to Christ and his changing understanding of the personal and corporate dimensions of the *imitatio Christi*. There is also plenty of evidence from which to reconstruct the historical and cultural factors influencing his "outer life." Stress on one aspect leads to pictures of a Christian mystic and hermit unconcerned with external affairs, whilst stress on the other presents him as a very effective (although unofficial) agent of French colonialism, whose "religious phase" did not really separate him from his own and his family's military tradition.

So one interpretation would seem to allow us to conclude that the *imitatio Christi* was the mainspring of his life, although it would also

<sup>4</sup> Taylor, *loc. cit.*, pp. 25-27, C.O. McMullen (ed.), *The Nature of Guruship* (Delhi: ISFCK, 1976); J. E. Royster, "Muhammad as teacher and exemplar," *Muslim World*, LXVIII, No. 4 (1978), pp. 235-58.

<sup>5</sup> Exceptions to this are the first, and in many ways still the best, biography: R. Bazin, *Charles de Foucauld, explorateur du Maroc, ermite du Sahara* (Paris: Plon, 1921, ET London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1931<sup>2</sup>), which did not raise the problem discussed below, and the following work which takes the matter seriously: M. Carrouges, *Foucauld devant l'Afrique du Nord* (Paris: Cerf, 1961). De Foucauld's spiritual development has been exhaustively chronicled by J. F. Six, *Itinéraire spirituel de Charles de Foucauld* (Paris: Seuil, 1958); the same author has also edited an important anthology, *Lettres et carnet* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), of which there is an English translation rather confusingly titled *Spiritual Autobiography of Charles de Foucauld* (Wheatthampstead: Anthony Clarke, 1964). Other useful but brief works available in English include *Letters from the Desert* (London: Burns and Oates, 1977), *A Little Brother, Silent Pilgrimage to God* (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 1974).

raise questions about the validity of such a life apparently oblivious of events in the outside world. Would this approach not involve dealing with theologically and psychologically dangerous abstractions?

The other view would have us believe that De Foucauld's devotional life had no significant bearing on his behaviour, and that actions he interpreted as a following or imitation of Christ were no more than a result of interplay between heredity and environment. On this interpretation, "Once a soldier, always a soldier" would be an apt summary of his life, whilst his own outlook, "Once a monk, always a monk," should be discounted.

Who then was De Foucauld? Was he one or the other? Was he sometimes one, and sometimes the other? Were these different aspects of his personality kept separate or were they integrated?

Examination of the two interpretations outlined above shows that they simplify matters through only considering part of the evidence. When all the material is put together a chronological development can be traced in De Foucauld's understanding of the *imitatio Christi* and of himself which fits into his response to external events. On one hand, there was a gradual simplification of his concept of the *imitatio Christi* from very naive and complex beginnings; whilst on the other there was a growing awareness that clues to the application of its central element—loving obedience to the Father—were to be found in the concrete realities of De Foucauld's own situation. The question to ask was "What would Jesus do *now*?" and De Foucauld was to respond with all that he was, to things as they were.

The important factor that is overlooked in exclusively "religious" or "secular" interpretations of his life is that the two processes just mentioned were complementary. For in responding "with all that he was," De Foucauld was responding not only with what he was by birth and upbringing and experience up to his conversion at age 28, but also with what he subsequently became through the long years of following his conception of the *imitatio Christi*. It is true that the drawing together of the two elements was a long, difficult and faltering spiritual pilgrimage for De Foucauld which one would not hold out for detailed emulation, but their ultimate reconciliation is an assurance that the basic *imitatio Christi* orientation can lead, as the New Testament and Christian spirituality have always affirmed, to a balanced and mature Christian life.

## II The Case of Charles de Foucauld

### *Life*

Charles Eugène de Foucauld was born 15 September 1858 at Strasbourg, the great-great-grand nephew of the Archbishop of Arles who was martyred along with his cousin and vicar-general, the blessed Armand de Foucauld de Pontbriand during the French Revolution. Whether or not tales of this great-great-grand uncle inspired Charles with his later longing for martyrdom, there was no easy or direct link

between the two, for Charles was more in tune with the military traditions of his family, and turned in that direction for a career after a disturbed and unhappy childhood which alienated him from the Christian faith.

The loss of both parents before he was six years old could not be compensated for by the kindly but somewhat over-indulgent care of his 70 year old grandfather, and the marriage of his cousin Marie in 1874 removed from Charles, at least for a time, his only real source of human understanding, love and security. The 16 year old boy lost his faith soon afterwards and was unable to settle down to either the atmosphere or the discipline of the Jesuit school in Paris at which he was preparing for the St Cyr Military College entrance examination. He had to finish his studies with a private tutor, and after a promising first year at St Cyr the old ennui returned. The death of his grandfather combined with Charles' coming into his family inheritance to make him even more morally and financially free to do just as he liked. His behaviour at the cavalry school at Saumur deteriorated even further, and he was fortunate to graduate bottom of the list.

The military authorities were tolerant of most of his escapades but drew the line at being publicly humiliated by Charles passing off his mistress as the Vicomtesse de Foucauld during the regiment's voyage to North Africa. Forced to resign from the active list, but finding life with her no solution to his chronic melancholia, Charles applied for reinstatement in his regiment as soon as he heard it was going into action. During eight months' hard fighting quelling a native uprising, he distinguished himself as a kind and brave officer, and acquired a sense of responsibility and purpose for the first time in his life.

If this experience was De Foucauld's moral conversion, it was also the beginning of a religious one prompted by his observations of the very visible place of religion in the Muslim Arabs' practice of daily prayers. He decided to try to find out more about them, but as the army would not sanction an expedition, he resigned his commission and went ahead on his own. The material De Foucauld collected during his wanderings through Morocco between June 1883 and May 1884 earned him the gold medal of the Paris Société de Géographie in 1885, but by the time his *Reconnaissance au Maroc* was published in February 1888, he was far more concerned with spiritual exploration than geographical.

While writing up his notes in Paris, De Foucauld spent a lot of his spare time at his aunt's house and so met many intelligent and cultivated Catholics. This made him think that the Christian faith might be reasonable after all, so he started to read religious books, pray in churches, and finally go to a priest for instruction. On that morning towards the end of October 1888, the abbé Huvelin saw that De Foucauld did not need to know *about* God, but to know and acknowledge him, so he ordered the enquirer to make his confession and go to communion.

De Foucauld must have felt that day that all his wanderings and searchings were now over, but in fact they had only just begun. For if it had taken him 28 years to discover that as a man he was a child of God, it was going to take nearly as long again to find out what kind of man that child should become, and to see that there could be continuity between the first man and the second. To realise that the latter was not necessarily a judgement of the former, but could be a fulfilment of it. There was a long spiritual pilgrimage ahead which can be divided into five periods of experience and questioning. Should he follow his vocation as a monk rather than a layman (1886-90), as a Trappist (1890-97), as a hermit in the Holy Land (1897-1900), as a priest in an Algerian garrison on the edge of the Sahara desert (1901-05), or, finally, as the "little brother" of the indigenous nomads at its centre (1905-16)?

### *Vocation*

Diverse as these rôles were, and the diversity is signified by the variety of signatures De Foucauld used over the years—the Viscount became the Trappist brother "frère Marie-Albéric," then successively "frère Charles," "frère Charles de Jésus," "frère Charles de Foucauld," and eventually just "Charles de Foucauld" (a significant return to the family name)—they were united by his unwavering conviction that they all sprang from his *imitatio Christi* vocation. Back in 1888 this had seemed to be a call to a solitary and penitential contemplative life in an Order where he would find the most exact imitation of Jesus. Once he had found that Order, there would be no further development in his life, he would simply follow this pattern of imitation until he died.

De Foucauld never abandoned this view of his vocation, but all three elements mentioned above turned out differently from the way he had hoped and expected. There was a development in his understanding of the nature of his vocation. There was recurring disappointment over his efforts to find or found an Order or community and a Rule which enshrined it, and there was a gradual realisation that his life could not be mapped out in advance according to it. All in all, by a long process of thought, experience, and reflection on his experience, De Foucauld moved from a *static* to a *dynamic* concept of the *imitatio Christi*. He began with an *a priori*, defined, simple, regular and predictable programme for life, but despite all his efforts to the contrary, found that he was living a relatively complicated, not always clearly or simply defined, varied and unpredictable existence.

This was not an easy transition to make, nor was it a once-for-all realisation. To say that De Foucauld moved from a static and defined understanding of the *imitatio Christi* to a dynamic and relatively open-ended one is to summarise his spiritual pilgrimage, but also to hide the day-to-day reality. In everyone there is a struggle between the comforts of the familiar and the unknown risks of the novel, but

De Foucauld's unsettled childhood and years of moral and religious drifting made this universal desire for security and the resulting tensions acute for him. This is shown in several aspects of his life: the initial wish to imitate Christ, the definition of this imitation in a Rule (both as a general programme and in detailed rules), and, in particular, in De Foucauld's insistence within that Rule *on the fundamental place of the rule of enclosure*.

### *Issues for Discussion*

All these matters raise disturbing questions. In what sense did Jesus follow a Rule of Life? How can *any* form of the religious life, whether Benedictine in origin (which De Foucauld followed as a Trappist), or based on the Seventeenth Century French tradition of the "hidden life" of Jesus at Nazareth (the idea behind De Foucauld's Rules for the Little Brothers), be an *imitatio Christi*? Important as these questions are, space requires that we confine ourselves to a third one which sums up and reinforces the others. As the principle of enclosure would seem to be the one above all that leads away from a realistic imitation—can we even imagine Jesus as a contemplative monk shut away from the world?—our discussion of De Foucauld's concept of the *imitatio Christi* will be focussed on that. This is not just a matter of biographical interest, significant though it is in De Foucauld's case, for it touches on a point of general concern.

### *The Fundamental Problem*

In dealing with the question of enclosure we are dealing with a particular example of the following problem. How does an understanding of the *imitatio Christi* based on a subjective bias springing from a very strong personality trait—either of strength or weakness—and apparently legitimised by a strand of Christian tradition, if not by biblical warrant, become a more faithful and wholesome *imitatio Christi*?

That is to say, how does one reach two things, a "wholesome" understanding of Christ which grasps the central meaning of his life, and is not based on a peripheral or particular aspect taken out of context; and a "whole" Christ who is more than a reflection of the would-be imitator's personality? For while imitation may well begin with a recognition of similarities—total dissimilarity would prevent any connections being made—without recognition of differences there can be no challenge to growth, no correction of unbalanced development, and no movement towards greater maturity.

## **III Presuppositions and Progress: De Foucauld and Enclosure**

### *The Nazareth Ideal*

The connection between De Foucauld's developing understanding of Christ and his concept of enclosure is an indirect one, which came

through his seeing the *imitatio Christi* as an imitation of the hidden life of Jesus at Nazareth. The evolution of De Foucauld's thought on this subject was equally complex and lengthy, but the essential points are as follows: he began with the assumption that the three stages of Jesus' life (the hidden years, the temptations and the public ministry) had legitimated three distinct and mutually exclusive types of religious life (the "Nazareth" life of contemplation in contact with one's immediate neighbours, the strictly contemplative life of the desert, and the life of priests and apostles, respectively), and that God had called him to the first of these.

Later on, he realised two things. The first was that these three lives did have certain things in common, such as poverty, chastity, obedience, contemplation, and practice of the inward virtues, chief of which were spiritual poverty and humility, and that just as Jesus moved from one to the other, so God might call De Foucauld to do the same. The second thing he realised was that in any case, Jesus' life was a unity maintained by his unwavering will to love, to serve and to save. This motivation was more important than the outward form of his life, and none of its three stages made any sense unless seen in terms of redemption and the cross. Consequently, whilst De Foucauld felt he was called to imitate the outward aspects of Jesus' life as well as the inner, he came to see that the latter had priority, and the whole was to be seen in a context of love and concern for the salvation of man.

Thus the "Nazareth" life did not have to be lived either in Nazareth (as De Foucauld believed while he was in the Holy Land, 1897-1900), or as a contemplative life apart from men (as he believed until much later on, up to 1904, near the end of the first stage of his life in the Sahara). So, whilst the "Nazareth" ideal always enshrined two aspects of De Foucauld's life, contemplation and eucharistic devotion (adoration of the blessed sacrament being seen as analogous to worshiping with the Holy Family), it did not remain a permanent justification of his wish for enclosure. He came to realise that if he modelled his contemplative life on the life of Jesus at Nazareth, it would involve more than occasional or casual contact with his neighbours. Not only should they be allowed to come to him, but in the name of love and in imitation of his Master, he should make positive efforts to go out to see them.

### *Facing Practical Realities: Beni-Abbès (1901-1905)*

So, the monk who had wished to spend the rest of his life in a cave when he was converted, who had then joined the Trappists as much for the security of monastery walls as for their strictness and poverty, who later lived in a garden shed in the enclosure of the Poor Clares at Nazareth, and who on returning to North Africa had deliberately established his dwelling in a little pocket of ground near but out of sight of the French garrison he was ministering to, found he had to

change his ideas. In part he had to face the practical realities of the situation at Beni-Abbès, in part he was challenged to come to a fuller understanding of his vocation.

In the first place, he found that he could not build the miniature monastery surrounded by high walls envisaged in the Rule he had written whilst in the Holy Land. For one thing, it was too much for one man to do, even with the willing assistance of friendly army officers. For another, the effort involved would disrupt both his daily timetable of worship and prayer, and also reduce his availability to the visitors who came at all hours. On some days sixty to a hundred would call, making De Foucauld glad that at least some of the night hours were left to him for prayer. However, this personal inconvenience was not to be confused with the far more serious matter of doing something to restrict visitors, which would be a sin against love.

The more theoretical issues were raised by his superior, Monseigneur Guérin, Apostolic Prefect in the Sahara. Wisely leaving on one side the question of De Foucauld's invincible but unrealistic conviction that he would soon be joined by the 12-20 brothers necessary to run a community of the size and type he had planned and was building for, Guérin raised three matters. In the first place, a fraternity the size De Foucauld was erecting would be a silent but eloquent witness against his professed values of poverty and simplicity. Secondly, such investment in property would make De Foucauld and any companions less flexible in their mission. This would be an important consideration whether one was thinking of ministry to the French troops who were frequently redeployed, or, as De Foucauld primarily was, of ministry to the nomadic or semi-nomadic indigenous inhabitants of the region. Thirdly and finally, was De Foucauld's idea of mission really in line with his *imitatio Christi* vocation? Didn't St Paul's example prove that Jesus' mission was more dynamic and outgoing?

De Foucauld's immediate reaction was that his and St Paul's vocations were quite different, but further reflection convinced him of the substantial truth of Guérin's observations. The result of this discussion in June 1903, some seventeen months after his arrival at Beni-Abbès, was that De Foucauld asked permission to go and settle in the south in a much humbler hermitage more like his garden shed at Nazareth, and, suspending his rule of enclosure, go out to meet the Touareg as often as possible in order to get to know them and give them the Gospel in their own language.

The carrying out of this plan was delayed partly by Guérin's caution—had he exerted undue pressure on De Foucauld and pushed him into something unsuitable?—and partly by a serious native uprising against the French. Meanwhile De Foucauld's preference for staying where he was reasserted itself. For one thing he would feel like a fish out of water if he left the enclosure, and for another, if he made a permanent move to the south he would have to give up his

long-cherished idea of Beni-Abbès being a springboard for mission into his beloved Morocco. But, as the only priest available it was his duty to go south, so he joined a military expedition which set out in January, 1904.

During the tour the former explorer made careful notes on suitable centres for establishing Christian settlements. Most of this information seems to have been collected for the use of other people, but at one place De Foucauld considered where he might live himself. When he examined the ground, he was torn by two possible sites. There was one near the river where natural caves could be converted into dwellings for the Brothers, and there was a peak about four hundred feet above the valley on which he might perch a tiny oratory and live close to God. He preferred the latter but saw that his duty to other people pointed to the former. His "enclosure" should be spiritual rather than physical, for Christ seemed to be saying to him: ". . . it is love which should make you inwardly recollected in me, and not separation from my children: see me in them, and like me at Nazareth, live near them, lost in God."<sup>6</sup>

On his return north in the autumn, De Foucauld was not sure whether he should stay at Beni-Abbès for some time, or go south again, but his annual retreat with the White Fathers at Ghardaia settled the matter. He decided that the only reason for moving from Beni-Abbès would be to go west into Morocco. In fact that possibility was the one thing that kept him at Beni-Abbès, for the settlement was getting larger all the time and it was becoming more and more difficult for De Foucauld to practise his Rule as he wished; he felt people were getting on top of him. However, after just four months back at his base, he accepted an invitation to join another tour that set out for the south in May, 1905, wondering as he went whether he should make a permanent settlement there, return to Beni-Abbès for good, or temporarily divide his time between north and south until circumstances indicated where he should come to rest and resume his silent and enclosed life.

#### *Further Experiences: Tamanrasset (1905-1916)*

On reaching the tiny isolated village of Tamanrasset in July, De Foucauld thought it would be an ideal place in which to live out the remainder of his days. But, remembering his duty to the French troops back at Beni-Abbès now deprived of the services of a priest, he resolved to spend part of every year in each centre. His first stay at Tamanrasset was prolonged until September, 1906, in order to consolidate his work there, but De Foucauld decided that his normal programme would be to spend six months at Tamanrasset, three months at Beni-Abbès, and three months travelling the thousand miles each way between the two.

<sup>6</sup> Diary, 26 May, 1904.

Unhappily for De Foucauld's innate love of order, life did not work out for him as simply as this. His routine was to be interrupted by a number of factors connected with his developing understanding of mission. So, for example, at the very time De Foucauld was settling down at Tamanrasset in 1905, he was working out a scheme to take a Touareg leader to France in order to allow him to experience a civilised Christian society first-hand. (It must be stated here that De Foucauld was *well* aware of the non-Christian elements of French life and was very selective about what he intended to expose his guest to.) For several reasons this plan was shelved until 1913, when De Foucauld made his *third* trip to France. He had "broken out" of his enclosure to make the first two brief visits in 1909 and 1911 with much trepidation, and only at the insistence of advisers who pointed out his duty to his relatives and the advantages to his mission that would result from contacts made during such visits.

By the end of his third trip, De Foucauld had accepted these biennial visits as a part of his pattern of life and was even looking forward to another in 1915, but once again his passion for regularity was to be thwarted. The outbreak of the First World War caused him to abandon the project, and since his services were not required at the Front, he decided to remain with the Touareg at Tamanrasset for the duration. Yet this period, from November 1913 until his murder on 1 December, 1916, was not passed in the enclosed and regular contemplative life that had always been his dream. In fact, right from its beginning in 1905, De Foucauld's life at Tamanrasset had developed differently from what he had planned. For, after his initial extended stay in 1906, his hopes to spend half of each year at Tamanrasset were modified by the ever-increasing demands of the lexicographical and cultural studies he was engaged in.

Undertaken at first rather reluctantly in obedience to Mgr Guérin, who realised the gifts that lay dormant in the former explorer of Morocco, these projects gathered momentum and began to shape the whole of De Foucauld's existence. In the interests of reducing the Touareg's language to writing, giving them the scriptures in their own tongue, and assembling material for dictionaries, grammars, and collections of poetry and proverbs, his life was transformed in several ways. De Foucauld's normal timetable of worship was suspended whilst he was studying for up to eleven hours daily; he would make more positive attempts to meet people near at hand, and go on short expeditions of a few days duration in order to meet others. Plans to visit Beni-Abbès were abandoned or delayed in favour of quick trips to a new mountain-top hermitage established in 1910 at Asekrem, only 35 miles away, and sometimes he felt too busy even to manage that.

De Foucauld never really felt entirely happy with this work, almost every year he hoped it would come to a permanent conclusion so that he could revert to his ideal life. But at the same time he realised its

value as a *preparatio evangelica*, and despite his growing realisation of the complexity and difficulty of the task he had undertaken, he was always setting out on more ambitious projects. De Foucauld made several attempts to find a companion who would work with him and then take over from him, but to no avail. It would be interesting to speculate what would have happened if he had become free to resume an enclosed contemplative life. Would everything that had modified it between 1905 and 1916 have been abandoned and rejected?

In one sense, we shall never know, but from a consideration of the trend of De Foucauld's life up to the point it was cut short on 1 December, 1916, it would seem that his outlook had been permanently altered. There are many indicators, not the least being his tacit acceptance of the position of unofficial representative of France and *de facto* chief of military intelligence in the Sahara from the outbreak of war, which signified acceptance of his own pre-conversion past. This acceptance of his whole life as an unbroken unity paralleled the gradual breakdown of "enclosure" as the fundamental principle of his every thought and action, and brought him to fullest realisation of the situation stated at the beginning of this article: De Foucauld ready "to respond with all that he was, to things as they were."

#### IV Towards an *Imitatio Christi* for Today

So, to return to the question that has been concerning us: "How does an understanding of the *imitatio Christi* based on a subjective bias springing from a very strong personality trait . . . become a more faithful and wholesome *imitatio Christi*?" The following conclusions would seem to follow from De Foucauld's life, one negative, and three positive.

##### *Intellectual Element*

Negatively, his presuppositions about the boundaries of a faithful *imitatio Christi*, whether arising from his temperament, his religious upbringing, or the climate of conventional interpretation, were not challenged or altered at an intellectual or conceptual level, nor were his changing views perceived by himself in that way. It would seem that De Foucauld never made bald statements like "My stress on the principle of enclosure is wrong" or "The 'Nazareth' idea is a very limited one derived from French tradition and it has little support in scripture."

Two comments may be made about this. The first is that this is a personal matter: it just happens that De Foucauld did not think conceptually, or contrast ideas with one another in the abstract. His method was to fasten on one approach at a time and meditate on it. If another way of looking at things came to his attention, he would chew that one over too. The latter might eventually modify the former in practical terms, but it would be a rare event for him to bring two ideas together verbally and note their agreement or contrast.

Even when he did that, the conclusion might not be drawn from the contrast as such, but be based on another authority. So, for example, on almost the only occasion on which De Foucauld admitted that he had been mistaken, it will be noted that his conclusion is not a simple deduction from an argument alone, but is based on an appeal to tradition.

Formerly I tended to see on one side the *Infinite*, the Holy Sacrifice, and on the other the *finite*, everything apart from God, and was always ready to sacrifice anything to celebrate Holy Mass. But there must have been a mistake in my reasoning here, for from the time of the apostles the greatest saints have in certain circumstances sacrificed the possibility of celebrating to works of spiritual charity, in order to make journeys, and so on.<sup>7</sup>

The second comment that might be made is an alternative to the first. We are not in fact dealing with an unusual or idiosyncratic approach to belief-change, but De Foucauld reminds us that intellectual "conversion" is relatively rare, and that for most people, non-intellectual factors are of equal or greater importance. What are these factors? There are many, of varying significance in particular cases, but two of universal importance are touched on in the quotation just given, and a third follows from the context.

#### *Example, Love and Experience*

The first of these factors is the *power of example*, the second is the *priority of love*, and the third is the *influence of experience*, for the quotation comes from a letter written two years after De Foucauld had settled at Tamanrasset. That is to say, his presuppositions about his vocation to an enclosed contemplative life of eucharistic devotion had been challenged, and to some extent modified, by two years of attempting to respond to the will of God in his situation.

Yet these three positive influences on De Foucauld's understanding and practice of the *imitatio Christi* will not suffice as necessary and sufficient principles for emulation as they stand, for it is clearly unsatisfactory to talk of the "priority of love" or the "influence of experience" in a vacuum. There must be principles of definition and discrimination, otherwise "love" can be advanced as the justification for almost any action, and the "influence of experience" turns out to be an unsupported if not unsupportable reaction to situations, controlled either by them, or by a person's instinctive temperamental response.

<sup>7</sup> Letter to Guérin, 2 July, 1907, quoted in Bazin, *op. cit.*, p. 260. De Foucauld received a Papal dispensation to say Mass alone in February 1908, but this was nearly three years after going to Tamanrasset and facing the problem.

For De Foucauld, such "definition and discrimination" was not a matter of the application of theoretical principle, but the result of continual communion with the living Christ. Love was defined and discrimination was achieved through De Foucauld's knowledge of the character and outlook of Jesus as it was portrayed in the gospels and transmitted in the lives of the saints.

To a certain extent De Foucauld was concerned with Jesus' complete moral character, with all the virtues that he exemplified, but the primary and unifying one was love (which therefore both gained content from the others and transcended them) expressed in two ways. Firstly, in relation to God, it was expressed in openness to his will and obedience to it. Secondly, in relation to man, it was shown in openness to his needs and response to them unrestricted by personal considerations. In other words, De Foucauld was open to both the general and particular will of God in his seeking to answer the two questions: "What would Jesus normally do—what would God normally want me to do?" and "What would Jesus do, and want me to do also, in *this* situation?"

In answering this latter question about responding to the demands of the moment, De Foucauld was powerfully aided by his devotional life. It is true enough—although the fact is often forgotten or ignored—that any way of life claiming to be an *imitatio Christi* should seek to give prayer the fundamental place that Jesus gave it, but there is another, less appreciated but important reason for giving prayer a vital place. Recent psychological and physiological studies have underlined the close connection that exists between meditation, perception and love.

### *Meditation, Perception and Love*

A person's perceptions are to a large extent governed by his needs: so if he feels in need of, for example, attention, love, a sense of meaning, or a sense of importance, these needs colour his perceptions in encounters with other people and so influence his actions. Thus, someone may request some kind of help, and because we have a need to be active or to feel useful, we respond to him quite inappropriately. It may well have been more helpful to that person for us to refuse to act and to encourage him to draw on his own or some other resources, but we acted, probably unconsciously, on the basis of our needs rather than his. In other words, we loved ourselves rather than the other person.

How then does one attain perceptions controlled by an appropriate, other-directed love? On one hand it is necessary to reduce or contain the influence of one's own needs, and on the other hand one has to develop insight into the needs of the other. The answer of both theology and experience is that a living sense of the love of God meets both these requirements, for it gives assurance that one's own needs will be taken care of, and it also helps to give a clear picture of the

needs of the other person and the ways in which these might be met. "Love of man" by itself is insufficient, as it can lead to an unbalanced empathetic identification with a particular individual in isolation, but "love of man" combined with "love of God" adds the dimension of God's impartiality and justice.

This "living sense of the love of God" is nourished through meditation on Scripture, in prayer, and also, especially in De Foucauld's case, by eucharistic devotion and communion. It is not only that the mystical, affective and intellectual elements of such practices (for which there is an increasing body of physiological evidence) have a key role to play in the formation and change of a person's total perceptions, these practices have a deeper significance in Christian belief and experience. For, whilst perceptual change in itself is no guarantee of action, prayer and meditation are cardinal avenues of that nourishment of the believer's union with Christ which gives him the moral strength to do what he sees to be right. All this, and more, may be said of what takes place in the mystery of the Eucharist.

When we move from a consideration of perception to a consideration of action, we encounter another dimension of the *priority of love*. From De Foucauld's experience it would seem that the *imitatio Christi* must not only be based on the "love-orientated perception" discussed above, it must also be founded on "love-orientated identification with Christ," for in the transition from perception to action there is always the possibility of failure. If one's relationship to Christ is based on fear, duty, and performance, it is always provisional and vulnerable, but if the relationship is based on love, on God's love for man rather than man's love for God, it is secure and potentially creative. In a relationship initiated and sustained by God man is free to fail without losing his identity, for he is also free to accept or love himself, and so free to remain open to God and to others.

### *Eschatological Dimension*

Finally, this openness to the future, or to the inescapable eschatological dimension of the *imitatio Christi*, is both a warning and an encouragement.

It is a warning that preconceptions and presuppositions are only valid if they are understood as signposts indicating the general direction the journey should take. It is an encouragement that the journey begun in this life will be fulfilled in the next, however unpromising present progress appears. In short, both theology and experience maintain that the *imitatio Christi* is not to be understood as a static archaeological reconstruction, but as a journey undertaken with a living guide. There are many aspects of De Foucauld's own pilgrimage that we would not want to emulate, but having made due allowance for factors arising from his own personality or environment, we are left with a substantial and permanent contribution to thinking about the *imitatio Christi* as a programme for Christian existence.

## ***Conclusion***

De Foucauld's life demonstrates that the *imitatio Christi* can be an incarnated reality rather than a disembodied fiction if it has certain important elements.

It is to be understood as a process of total development in which different elements of the personality are unified and together brought to maturity through love-orientated perception and love-orientated identification with Christ, defined and maintained by meditation and communion with him, and characterised by a continual openness to his will.

For, as De Foucauld himself knew well, whether one seems to be at the beginning, middle, or near the end of the journey, there is ultimately only but always one word. It is the word of invitation which purifies and directs, calls and enables. It is the word which can be grasped by the beginner, but cannot be exhausted by the maturest saint: "Come and see . . . Come . . . follow me."