

MODERN SPIRITUAL MASTERS SERIES

CARLO  
CARRETTO

*Selected Writings*



*Selected with an Introduction by*

ROBERT ELLSBERG

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## MODERN SPIRITUAL MASTERS

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## I, Carlo



### FIRST EXPERIENCE OF LIFE

I was born in Alessandria by... well, you might say, by accident. The city had no connection with my family. We had our true stock, our deep roots, in the Langhe hills, where my father and mother were farmers, with all the sweetness, strength, and piety of that marvelous country in their blood.

But Alessandria became my parents' temporary moorings. Young marrieds then, they had left their home to find employment. They had left behind them the rural civilization in which, God be thanked, they had rejoiced for generations and generations — and which they still carried with them, along with the few household goods to which they had fallen heir from their parents, who had remained up there in the old hamlet, to fade sweetly away like the light of an autumn sunset.

I should like to say something about this young family's displacement. It is something that comes to my mind whenever I think of the numberless such migrations occasioned by unemployment, need, or at times by unforeseen cataclysms like floods or earthquakes.

My father told me the story. He told me how devastating the year had been for the countryside — how hail had fallen with unheard-of violence for that part of the country, destroying everything. The worst was that the disaster had not come in August, when hail was fairly usual in the Langhe region and would batter only the vineyards then. But it had come in June, when

not only are the vines vulnerable, but the harvest is standing in the fields.

In short, that year the hail had destroyed absolutely everything: grain and grape, maize and greens.

Nothing was left.

My father told me how the young people of the countryside, in the face of this disaster, had met together and decided to go down to the plains in search of work. They knew that the harvest there required a great many hands, and that they would quickly find work.

He told me — I can still hear his voice — “We left in the evening, and walked all night — the whole forty miles — down to the plain, where farms were big and work was plenty.”

The vision of that platoon of youth has remained stamped in my mind — young people refusing to yield to adversity, striding in hope toward a toilsome, tough tomorrow.

I remember, as if it were today, the expression on my father’s face; and he added: “Just think, Carlo — after hiking the whole night long, we started reaping in the fields next morning as if we had been peacefully in our beds all night.”

That is the way to go, boys and girls!

I remember I looked at my father with admiration. I felt him close to me — and great, precisely in the function of a father, who, by telling the story of his own hard past, had imparted to me something very important: a sense of courage and hope.

My father had not asked himself whether God could exist if he was able to ignore human suffering, or was so distracted and insensitive as to permit cataclysms and hailstorms to pound down on the heads of the poor.

No, he had not wondered about that. For him, and for my mother, the God that existed was the God of hope — the God who made you get on your feet again, out of the rubble of the earthquake, the God who pushed you, impoverished by the scourge of the hail, to begin over again without any fuss, and force yourself to find inside yourself the strength to start out

down the road again — and not look to others for everything as if they owed it to you — but above all to free yourself from the bitterness that seeing injustice can give you, or from the surprise of not being helped.

The God of my father was the God of life, the presence always present, always alive and operating within one.

He was the God who does not give you permission to fling yourself on the ground in despair and say, “It’s all over!”

It is not true that it is all over. It all changes. And you had better be ready, willing, and able when the change comes, even if it presents itself to you as something hard — and especially if it presents itself to you as something incomprehensible. Who knows? Perhaps this change, this novelty, can bring you something good!

After all . . .

After all, the new, the unforeseeable, has always been the product of disaster.

And this was certainly no small factor in my family’s story.

You see, my father ended his story by explaining that this misfortune had so shaken him that he took it into his head to leave his native countryside and go looking for work somewhere else.

He spoke to my mother and she agreed.

He took an examination, and qualified for a job with the State Railways. That was how we landed in Alessandria, where I was born, and where two years later my brother was born. But then we headed for Turin, in search of more suitable surroundings for poor people to rear their adolescent children. We set up house in an outlying, lively district of the city, where there was a little bit of everything, but especially a little bit of everything we needed.

The hail had been a misfortune. That was a fact. But it was also a fact that the hail was why we landed in this quarter, where we were lucky in making many young friends and

where — and this was the height of good luck for us — there was a little oratory of Don Bosco.

How much that oratory meant to us!

How much it meant to my mother to have that little church on Via Piazza, where she went to pray and gather strength!

Herein is contained the mystery of the history of our salvation — the mystery of our continual exoduses, of this constant getting up and moving out, invited and impelled by a force which, when we do not recognize it, we call fate, but which, when we are clear about it, and aware, we call the will of God.

Do you believe that everything is part of a plan, a design, an intervention of God in our affairs? I do. And I am convinced that God's love can transform the darkness of a disaster or the irrationality of an earthquake into an event that can influence, or even completely change, our lives. Ours was certainly changed. And for the better.

Finding ourselves, in adolescence, in a place so conducive to the development of our faith, and so rich in wonderful encounters, furnished our migrant family with an effective aid to becoming more socially adult, more open to good.

It was in this very place that my brother's missionary vocation sprang up, and later the religious orientation of my sisters, leading both of them to veil and vows.

Years later, when I was studying philosophy, I came upon this passage in Augustine: "God can permit evil only insofar as he is capable of transforming it into a good." And in the light of my own experience, I turned my father's story over in my mind.

And then Augustine's saying seemed to me all the truer.

My family was Christian. That was a fact. I was born to the faith in this family. I learned to pray at my mother's knee, to fear God, to go to church, not to blaspheme, to join in the processions, and to put up the crib when Christmas drew near.

When I think of my childhood piety, traditional, rather static, and somewhat lacking in creative thrust, I still cannot help but find extremely worthwhile values.

Even today I am struck by the unity that faith and culture, the human and the divine, prayer and peace, Church and family, imagination and reality, God and humanity, produced in me.

I had not as yet read the Book of Genesis, where it tells how God placed the human being in the Garden of Eden, to till it and guard it. Yet I felt myself to be in a garden, within the confines of my own world, of my vocation, and was aware of a relationship with him who strolled beneath the trees of the garden, gradually revealing his invisible presence to me.

I did not as yet know Jeremiah, who tells the story of the potter fashioning his clay, who tirelessly refashions the pot that breaks in his hands, shaping another vessel from the same clay (Jer. 18:1–6). But I did feel myself to be in the hands of a God who continuously refashions us and never tires of changing the plans he has made for us when we resist him with the poverty and fragility of our clay.

Yes, my family helped me lay the foundations of faith and hope. And I feel such gratitude for that Langhe region, where I sucked up life, and where the people of the soil kept the calendar of the saints within easy reach, staking out the seasons with the great religious feasts, knowing how to cast their seed into the furrows while invoking St. Lucy and St. Roch, firm in the certainty of a bond between heaven and earth, between rain and prayer, between the happiness of board and bed and the divine order of things.

We shall never be able to say enough about the importance of a popular piety rooted in the flesh and blood of the poor, and slowly ripened over generations, even though — as is only natural — slightly muddled or tinged with a pinch of superstition, yet ever dominated by and enveloped in an immense, unique and solemn mystery: God. . . .

I had the good fortune to be born among the poor, among the marvelous folk of the countryside, who had simplicity and littleness kneaded into them. My father and mother were very little. They were just made for believing and hoping. And I found myself with my hand in their hands.

And everything was easier.

How at peace I felt with them, and how serene my childhood was!

It was like living within a great parable, where God was always at home and I was always with him. If, owing to distraction or frivolity, I sometimes forgot him, he always thought of a pain or a mystery to remind me of his presence.

But more than anything else, it was events that, very slowly, molded everything together into one. To be sure, the mystery continued to surround me. In fact it became ever denser as I grew up and sought to understand.

The mystery! What was the mystery? It was like my mother's womb, hugging me all about, containing me and generating me to life, in that so discreet, sweet twilight under her heart.

What could be truer and simpler than a woman's womb, containing a child?

But what could be more mysterious and incomprehensible, if you set yourself to reasoning on the how, the why, and the when?

After a placid, unruffled childhood, lived as it were for free in the bosom of my family, I went through an adolescence marked by the struggle with doubt and by the enfeebling of hope.

Uneasiness was born in me, and the dying away of joy became ever more noticeable. I came to know things forbidden, and their mysterious attraction.

My mother started telling me not to turn in on myself so much, and would complain about my selfishness.

On occasion, when looking in the mirror, I discovered my capacity for sarcasm.

In my heart, I revolted more and more. My family had less and less influence over me.

Alone, I was reeling.

And then it was that the Church came to meet me.

As the family is the first great aid and support of our first steps, so the Church is the aid and support of all our steps, especially in the struggle against evil.

What would the family be without the community formed by the Church?

What would Israel be without the people of God?

Someone once made a very true and intelligent observation: "You will find peoples without city walls, and without art. But you will never find a people without a temple."

My own first temple was the parish church, which welcomed the big boy I was, the teenager in crisis, the little one in evolution, like an antenna receiving signals from all the beautiful and not so beautiful realities of street, school, factory, shops— from the human community in which I was immersed.

How extraordinary the parish church is! Even when it is a twisted, poor, old-fashioned house as mine was!

We had not reached the Council yet, and the parish church was still a sacrament-dispensing machine and a big hodgepodge of childishness and clericalism.

But it was the meeting place of the people of God, and what human beings did not do, the power of the Spirit and common faith did.

I may have had little faith, but the faith of others met me along the way; unedifying examples there may have been in abundance, but the great examples of the poor, of the simple, and of the holy priests, were never lacking.

How I loved and love the parish church, even though I often hid myself behind the pillars supporting the nave in order to avoid my responsibilities.

The parish church is like a ship at sea, a calm in the woods, a shelter in the mountains. It has always something to offer, even when old and often without form or beauty.

I breathed a tradition, even if a little musty; I absorbed a culture, a bit static though it may have been; I found a people, even if they were sometimes rather tired. . . .

In my own case, the little church that helped me understand the big Church and remain in it, was the Youth Movement of Catholic Action.

It took me by the hand and walked with me, it fed me with the Word, it offered me friendship, it taught me how to fight, it helped me know Christ, it inserted me alive into a living reality.

I can say — and this seems to me to be the correct way of putting it — that just as the family was the spring, so the little youth community was the riverbed in which I learned to swim.

What a help this community was to me!

And what would have become of me if I had not found it?

I tremble at the very thought.

It gave me just what my parents, who were growing old now, could no longer give me. . . .

Catholic Action made me undergo a new catechesis: a more mature one, more in keeping with the times. It passed on to me the great idea of the lay apostolate; it introduced the Church to me as the people of God and not as the familiar, old-fashioned clerical pyramid.

But even more, it gave me the feeling and warmth of community.

For me, the Church was no longer the walls of the parish church, where you went to do obligatory or official things, but a community of brothers known to one another by name, who were traveling with me along the road of faith and love.

There I came to know friendship based on common faith, and commitment to a common task that was no longer the prerogative of the clergy but a gift given to all. I came to know the dignity of working and raising a family as a genuine vocation.

Little by little the community helped me to take on my responsibilities, suggested to me my first commitments and encouraged me in them, taught me how to publish newsletters and write in defense of the faith, and gave me a taste for the Word and taught me to proclaim it at meetings.

And, since I was untrained, the community was always careful to instill in me the humility of study and daily meditation on the Scriptures.

After a few years I found I had changed. Now my heart was filled with new values and a great desire for action.

I remember, there was no more spare time. Between personal contacts and first drafts of speeches, between writing and traveling, my entire personality was caught up, completely caught up, in an ideal that had now taken flesh in real life. . . .

When I was twenty-three and God burst in on me with his Spirit, my new relationship with him radically changed my life.

Everything was new now and everything was influenced by the change that followed my conversion. . . .

The intimacy God bestowed on me was so true, so strong, that it left its tokens and left them where there could be no room for doubt: in life, in sorrow, in joy, in conversation with my fellow-men, in the raw task of every day.

If he held me in his arms, I could spend the whole night in prayer. If he spoke to me, it was easy to forgive someone who had done me wrong. If he stopped in my room, I would have gone to the ends of the earth for the gospel he preached. I shall never forget the manner in which his Spirit burst in on me. He stormed in like someone madly in love and asked me to love him back with total madness of my own.

And there was something here that removed all doubt, that wiped out my suspicion that the encounter could be mere emotionalism, that convinced me that this was for real, and that this tremendous love was something altogether different from fantasy — that it was the Word of God.

In the Word, I found all that I had felt, explained. I found the key to the wonderful castle which I had now entered, without knowing how.

I learned Hosea by heart. With Ezekiel, I wept for my betrayals of love. I hoped against hope with Isaiah, and my story took flesh in the story of Israel. . . .

I was then thinking about getting married: the thought had not even occurred to me that there might be any other choice. I wanted to get married, I dreamed of getting married, I was happy when I thought about being married.

And instead. . . .

It happened one afternoon. It was hot on account of the sirocco blowing across the city.

I was kept waiting by a doctor friend of mine, who was held up at the hospital. We had planned to go for a walk along the Po and talk about our common ideals for changing the world — immediately . . . as happens when you are young and still unaware of the actual problems.

I went into a church to calm the tumultuous thoughts burning inside me and sat down quite close to the tabernacle. I felt the refreshing coolness filling the great nave, but closed my eyes because everything was ugly, old, and slovenly. For some time then I had been in the habit of keeping my eyes closed when I prayed, and seeking more for peace than words, more for the Presence than formal worship.

There I was, sitting, when . . .

Yes, when the unforeseeable happened.

I had often read in the Bible about Abraham's encounter at the terebinth of Mamre.

Was my encounter of the same nature?

I do not know.

Did I recall the burning bush seen by Moses?

Was it the same thing?

I cannot tell. . . .

I had often thought of the touch of Someone who knocks on your door, calling your name, as happened to Samuel, and you feel like saying “Lord, what can I do for you?”

It was like this, but different — impossible to put such things into words. I know that this unforeseeable “passage” left me with something very clearly and precisely new: an altogether unfamiliar proposal, the beginning of a personal, particularly challenging, and warm conversation.

You will not marry.

You will stay single.

I shall be with you.

Do not be afraid.

In the days that followed, it was easy to see that things had changed in me and that the passage of God had been a radical one. I had the palpable conviction that I would now no longer be able to fall in love in a certain way with a woman, and that if I wanted to be happy, I should have to remain single.

Alone with my God.

— *I Sought and I Found*

## THE MYSTERY OF A CALLING

God’s call is mysterious; it comes in the darkness of faith. It is so fine, so subtle, that it is only with the deepest silence within us that we can hear it.

And yet nothing is so decisive and overpowering for a person on this earth, nothing surer or stronger.

This call is uninterrupted: God is always calling us! But there are distinctive moments in this call of his, moments which leave a permanent mark on us — moments which we never forget.

Three times in my life I have been aware of this call.

The first one brought about my conversion when I was eighteen years old. I was a schoolteacher in a country village.

In Lent a mission came to the town. I attended it, but what I remember most of all was how boring and outdated the

sermons were. It certainly wasn't the words which shook my state of apathy and sin. But when I knelt before an old missionary—I remember how direct his look was and how simple—I was aware that God was moving in the silence of my soul.

From that day on I knew I was a Christian and was aware that a completely new life had been opened up for me.

The second time, when I was twenty-three, I was thinking of getting married. It never occurred to me that I should do anything else.

I met a doctor who spoke to me of the Church and of the beauty of serving her with one's whole being, while remaining in the world. I do not know what happened at that time nor how it happened; the fact is that I was praying in an empty church where I had gone to escape from my state of inner confusion. I heard the same voice that I had heard during my confession with the old missionary. "Marriage is not for you. You will offer your life to me. I shall be your Lover forever."

I had no difficulty in giving up the idea of getting married and consecrating myself to God because everything within me was changed. It would have seemed incongruous to me, falling in love with a girl, for God engaged my whole life.

Those years were full of work, of aspirations, of meeting different people, and of wild dreams. Even the mistakes—and there were many—were caused by the fact that so much within me was still unpurified.

Many years passed; and many times I was amazed to find myself praying to hear once more the sound of that voice which had had so great an importance for me.

Then, when I was forty-four years old, there occurred the most serious call of my life: the call to the contemplative life. I experienced it deeply in the depth which only faith can provide and where darkness is absolute—where human strength can no longer help.

This time I had to say “yes” without understanding a thing. “Leave everything and come with me into the desert. It is not your acts and deeds that I want; I want your prayer, your love.”

Some people, seeing me leave for Africa, thought that I must have had some personal crisis, some disappointment. Nothing is further from the truth. By nature I am optimistic, my orientation is one of hope; and I don’t know the meaning of discouragement and it would never occur to me to “give up the fight” in this way.

No, it was the decisive call. And I never understood it so deeply as on that evening at the Vespers of St. Charles in 1954, when I said “yes” to the voice.

“Come with me into the desert.” There is something much greater than human action: prayer; and it has a power much stronger than human words.

And I went into the desert.

Without having read the constitutions of the Little Brothers of Jesus I entered their congregation. Without knowing Charles de Foucauld\* I began to follow him.

For me it was enough to have heard the voice say to me, “This is the way for you.”

Wandering among the desert tracks with the Little Brothers I discovered how real that way was. By following Charles de Foucauld, I was convinced that it was the way for me.

God had already told me that in faith.

When I reached El Abiodh Sidi Seik for the novitiate, my novice master told me with the perfect calm of a man who had lived twenty years in the desert: “*Il faut faire une coupure,*

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\*Charles de Foucauld (1858–1916) was born into an aristocratic family, but after a dissolute youth he pursued a spiritual path that led him ultimately to the Saharan desert, where he sought to imitate the “hidden” life of Jesus of Nazareth. Ordained a priest in 1901, he established his first hermitage in Béni-Abbès in Algeria, later moving to Tamanrasset, where he was killed on December 1, 1916. Seventeen years after his death his life and writings inspired René Voillaume, a French priest, to establish the Little Brothers of Jesus, the first of several congregations linked in their origins to the spirituality of Foucauld.

*Carlo.*” I knew what kind of cutting he was talking about and decided to make the wrench, even if it were painful.

In my bag I had kept a thick notebook, containing the addresses of my old friends: there were thousands of them. In his goodness God had never left me without the joys of friendship.

If there was one thing I really regretted when I left for Africa, it was not being able to speak to each one of them, to explain the reason for my abandoning them, to say that I was obeying a call from God and that, even if in a different way, I would continue to fight on with them to work for the kingdom.

But it was necessary to make the “cut” and it demanded courage and great faith in God.

I took the address book, which for me was the last tie with the past, and burned it behind a dune during a day’s retreat.

I can still see the black ashes of the notebook being swept away into the distance by the wind of the Sahara.

But burning an address is not the same thing as destroying a friendship, for that I never intended to do; on the contrary, I have never loved nor prayed so much for my old friends as in the solitude of the desert. I saw their faces, I felt their problems, their sufferings, sharpened by the distance between us.

For me they had become a flock which would always belong to me and which I must lead daily to the fountains of prayer.

Sometimes I almost felt their physical presence when, for example, I entered the Arab-style church at El Abiodh or, later, the famous hermitage constructed by Fr. Charles de Foucauld himself at Tamanrasset.

Prayer had become the most important thing. But it was still the hardest part of my daily life. Through my vocation to prayer I learned what is meant by “carrying other people” in our prayer.

So, after many years I can say that I have remained true to my vocation, and at the same time I am completely convinced that one never wastes one’s time by praying; there is no more helpful way of helping those we love. — *Letters from the Desert*

## TO THE DESERT

Marseilles-Orano, December 11, 1954

My dearest Sister,\*

I'm writing to you because *I know you're very concerned* and because I think I'll catch you at this very moment in church, praying for your brother who's going away.

Poor Dolce! The Lord has given you the vocation of holding in your heart all the cares of the family. And of suffering them.

Don't worry, Dolce; it's God who's calling me. I know his voice. Think of my life up till now: I've always followed the right star, haven't I? Haven't I pulled in great netsful of souls? But I couldn't rest on my laurels anymore: my capital was all used up. I would have ended up a mediocre representative for God, dissatisfied with myself. There was nothing for it but to make a break, and since God said "come," I had the courage (by his grace) to respond. Just think: I'm sailing the same African sea as St. Augustine: over there is his diocese of Hippo.

I'm going into the *desert*, my desert. Even if I'm making a mistake and have to return (but I don't think so), I can't imagine anything better than a year's *desert*, real desert. I want to empty myself and become nothing, then say to Jesus: fill me with Yourself alone.

Isn't that a grace? Be happy. You know I've always been shrewd and made good deals. I've never made such a good deal as this.

How often we have discussed the sterility of today's apostolate. I want to go and study the real thing, because this is the best situation and the best place to understand how useless the superstructures are.

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\*This was the first letter written by Carretto after his departure from Rome. It is addressed to his sister Dolcidea, a nun in the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in Turin.

And after all, you will pray for me: You won't abandon me to my loneliness, will you?

I'm so happy, Dolce! I feel as though I'm fifteen and just starting out. It will be the sweetest novitiate of my life, made in the place where the Desert Fathers made theirs, in the biblical footsteps of the real mystics of the past, those who laid the foundations of European Christianity.

What an immense grace God is giving me! But how did I come to deserve it after so many sins? Truly our God is a God of mercy! He loads you with gifts at the very time you're giving him no thought, or worse, betraying him.

*He is Father!*

And I want to become his son, his real son.

*He is Jesus my brother.*

And I want to become a genuine brother to him.

*He is the Spirit of Love.*

And I want to enroll in his School of Fire and let myself be all burnt up.

What a joy, my dear sister!

I send you such a hug as I've never given you in my life, because I love you as never before.

Love, Carlo



El Abiodh, December 16, 1954

Dearest Dolce, dearest all,

Here I am settled in the peace of the African desert. Today dawn broke on my first morning as a novice after a night under the stars.

Let's go back and tell the story in the right order. As you well know, I left Termini on the evening of the Immaculate Conception after a quiet night, and reached Marseilles in pouring rain...

On the morning of the 11th I went aboard the *Bel-Abbes*, a ferry of almost ten thousand tons, after saying goodbye to

the friends who had come with me. The crossing was good despite a rather choppy sea and . . . headlong dashes by some of the passengers, especially the ladies. A day later, or to be exact at one o'clock on Sunday the 12th, I set foot on African soil at the port of Orano. Here too I was expected and spent Sunday afternoon at Mass in the cathedral and visiting this beautiful African city. On Monday morning I journeyed on southward in a coach bound for Jaida, passing through the fertile Algerian coastal strip.

It was wonderful arable land, just as well cultivated as the most fertile lands of Europe. Vines, olives, fruit trees, oranges, mandarins, wheat: everything that a Mediterranean country can produce. And the early spring vegetables like peas and so on were fully ripe.

After Jaida I took another coach for Géryville, the first leg of my long journey. Here, little by little as I moved on, the vines decreased and the rocks and cold increased, a sure sign that the sea's kindly influence was falling behind me. I arrived at Géryville in the afternoon as guest of the White Fathers, where I was received, as everywhere, with much warmth. I spent the night in Géryville with . . . a stove burning in my room (this tells you that the Sahara is a very cold land which gets hot when the sun shines). In the morning I was lucky enough to find the sun shining so that I could leave again for the South (when it rains, and in winter it rains a lot in this first stretch of steppe, nobody leaves because the tracks are flooded with water and impossible to travel). So I set off in a sturdy truck, with which to tackle the hardest 60-odd miles (after the 250 already traveled).

Bear it in mind that it took me almost six hours, seeing that we had to travel very very slowly along impossible tracks through the steppe. The steppe isn't yet desert, but a preparation for it. Imagine a vast plateau at more than three thousand feet strewn with rocks, sand, clumps of grass as tough as steel blades, and here and there nomad Bedouins' herds of sheep and camels.

Toward the end of the journey the steppe stopped and the real desert began. In fact, El Abiodh is the last center of habitation before the wide open Sahara, a real sea of sand with just a few oases where water bubbles up.

I arrived at 3:00 p.m. to be met with great eagerness by about forty French, Belgian, Peruvian, Spanish, and Canadian novices (just about the whole world in fact), and particularly by Fr. [Arturo] Paoli, who was here, dressed as a novice.

El Abiodh is a tiny but very beautiful oasis. It consists of an Arab-style building, which includes a church and some porticoes, off of which open the cells. A community of about fifty Little Brothers lives here, dedicating themselves to manual labor and prayer. They make bread and till the fields (the few possible), build walls, make household objects, and live as the poorest of the poor.

All possessions are held in common, and there are no aesthetic considerations (I've still got things to learn). We eat sitting on the floor in the dining room off a single aluminum plate. We drink water out of the one jug and anyone who is squeamish can leave within the day. In the cells we sleep on the floor (there are no beds) and everything is reduced to the indispensable minimum.

The whole thing recalls the original Franciscans, but the local atmosphere is an Arab one of the greatest simplicity possible to imagine. It really is a complete stripping away! And it is just this which leads to the most complete feeling of freedom and joy. Around me I see nothing but happy faces oozing joy at every pore.

They are Spartans in training for a really hard life. This is our timetable: rise at 3:00 a.m., for prayers until 7:00.

Begin work at, 7:00 which lasts until 1:00 p.m. Builders, farm-workers, carpenters, electricians, truck-drivers, etc. They work on the house, they build the women's novitiate a few hundred yards away, and they make all the craft objects for the

surrounding Arab villages. In the afternoon, adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, study, and a bit more work.

At 9:00 we go off to sleep or to write letters. After 11:00 we all have to be in our beds, which are not beds, because we sleep on the floor on a mat. The nights are as cold as in our mountains, and the days are hot. The same thing happens here as in our mountains, where there is an extraordinary difference between when the sun is shining and when it's not. We go from a few degrees Fahrenheit below freezing to 85 above. They say that in summer it goes from a few degrees above freezing to 110 above in the sun.

We shall see. At the moment it's winter and comfortable. I have been given a cell of my own, which is seen as a mark of respect, but I don't think it will last long because novices continue to arrive and there's no more space.

I have fallen in with some amazing people. They are all used to tough spiritual battles and, like us, have made headway in them. No young person is taken on before the age of twenty and I think I understand the reason. You and Emerenziana,\* who did ordinary novitiates, have no idea of what things are like here. Nobody thinks about material things. There is almost a couldn't-care-less attitude toward all comfort and a search for austerity.

But it's all about prayer, and the hours of adoration feel like communal battles. *The silence is infinite*, and the desert which surrounds this oasis is forever inviting us to keep quiet. This is really the most solemn impression I have had since my arrival.

I don't yet know what I shall be doing: perhaps they will make me a builder or a fieldworker because I am sturdy. It is the Trappist rule: seven hours work, seven hours prayer, and seven or less of sleep.

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\*Carretto's oldest sister, Emerenziana, was also, like Dolcidea, a member of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

You can imagine how happy I feel! Really happy! I've received an infinite grace from the Lord and I've got to be worthy of it. Don't worry. I wrote to you, Dolcidia, *that I have always found my guiding star. I feel I've found it this time too.*

God loves me like a baby and is guiding me like a child. Don't worry. *Instead pray for me as much as you can. . . .*

Lots of kisses, Carlo



El Abiodh-Sidi-Sheikh, Christmas 1954

Dearest Dolcidia, dearest all,

The Christmas star of 1954 has led me into the great Sahara desert in the footsteps of Fr. de Foucauld.

El Abiodh, which is where I am living at the moment, is a tiny oasis perched on the edge of the great sea of sand, which stretches south as far as Equatorial Africa. It is made up of two little Arab villages built out of sun-dried brick, in which the population lives barricaded around a few wells, committed to tending herds and cultivating a few little fields of corn. Next to the two villages stands the novitiate of the "Little Brothers of Jesus," of which Fr. de Foucauld dreamed and for which he wrote the Rule; Fr. Voillaume, the author of the book *Seeds of the Desert*, organized it with a few companions.

The first thing that strikes you when you come to El Abiodh is the silence. It is an immense, total, all-absorbing silence. The last sixty-two miles of steppe, over a poor road even for trucks, are a good preparation for this African setting of stark horizons, nomad herdsmen, and sand battling against the last clumps of grass and thorns.

It would certainly be difficult to find a place more suited to meditation and adoration, and we can see at once why Fr. de Foucauld, who was called the last Desert Father, said this place had a particular power to call distracted and sensual souls back to God.

The nomads' black tents (symbol of the human journey toward the Eternal Pastures), the Arabs prostrate in prayer, the luminosity of the sky (European eyes are not used to this), the great sea of sand that surrounds us, the inescapable realities of silence and death — these are indisputably the elements of an ascetical life. In this place the novice master's invitation seems natural: divest yourself totally of all you had until yesterday — clothes, suitcases, boxes, nips of drinks, dabs of scent, hidden comforts — while you repeat to yourself: *Take no more care for your life and health than for a tree or a falling leaf.*

Once stripped naked you are reclothed in workman's clothes, which are not your own, and a white Arab "gandura" which you will use in church during choir. That is the way your life begins, as a pupil of a Desert Father.

You get a mat on the ground, a sleeping bag into which you climb on cold nights, a pair of sandals, and a Rule specially designed to bend the stiffest backs like mine. It could be summed up more or less as: seven hours manual labor, seven hours prayer, and seven hours sleep.

This is what is needed for this band of forty French, Belgian, African, Chilean, Spanish, and Brazilian novices. They have all, like me, reached adulthood, been tested in battle and infected by the "problematic" and by "cultural indoctrination" of a religious sort. Here the overriding law is: "Stop thinking about what you have to do to win over the brothers; worry about being. From now on your sermon has to be your life and not your words. And living an authentic life means copying the life of Jesus."

Fr. Foucauld was fond of distinguishing three periods in the life of Jesus: Nazareth, the desert, and the public life.

He lived out his Rule on this scheme: To copy Nazareth, seek out solitude to fill yourself with God, burn with love for souls.

1. *Nazareth.* To achieve the imitation of Jesus of Nazareth, you accept being poor laborers for the whole of your life. This is a major effort, especially for those of us who come from the

middle class. The set-up of the novitiate, and of the Brotherhood where we will go to live later, is based on work. The vow of poverty accepts the same poverty as laborers and wage-earners, in a word the people. Moreover, it was the poverty of Jesus.

Before clothing me in the novice's habit, Fr. Voillaume asked me, "Are you ready for the Gospel of Jesus, not only to live the life of a poor man with no possessions, but also to accept the conditions of the poor, who must work to live, as divine law requires?"

Once this premise has been stated, the rest falls into place. Would you like me to give you an idea of how we live? Imagine a building site along a road under construction. Clothes, food, medicine, conveniences: they are exactly the same as those imposed by the harsh law of manual labor which is the labor of the poorest. There is food and enough of it, but it comes in a mess tin with no refinements. And if you leave any, you eat it the next evening, and if you still leave some, you eat it the next; that's what the poor do. Clothes? As tattered and dusty as on a building site. The infirmary? If you saw it, and its infirmarian, you would understand what I meant before by the saying, "Don't be more anxious about your own life than about a tree or a falling leaf."

2. *The desert.* This is certainly one of the marks of the team which I have joined by becoming a "Little Brother." Here they are so convinced that the reasons for the "crisis" are within ourselves, in our superficiality, in the very superstructures of our piety, that they adopt no half-measures to get away from it. They have to make a clean sweep, and then with the one book they let you keep, the Bible, they send you out into the solitude and give the desert the job of getting to work on you. It has to be experienced to be believed, so much so that I've been convinced right from my first encounter that the Lord created the desert just to give space to souls needing to collect themselves.

That is why, faced with the dominant paganism of the early centuries, Christianity went to sink its roots in the desert, with the monasticism of East and West.

3. *The apostolic life.* The apostolate of the Little Brothers is directed toward the poor and most forsaken, or better still toward those furthest from Christ, where words are almost useless but witness is necessary. That is why the two great areas toward which we are urged are Islam and the world of work.

What do you preach to a Muslim? It's not just useless; its impossible. What do you preach to workers poisoned by Marxism? It's the same.

What then? You stand alongside them, living as they do, with the witness of a Christian life rich in love and joy despite the pain of labor. When it's necessary one should talk too, but the overriding concern is to demonstrate the goodness of the gospel with one's life.

You can see the power of this formula, which at any rate is the one which has won me over.

You can see why we study Arabic here, and Russian even more so. You have your finger on the pulse of our situation, the situation toward which the modern world is moving, so you won't find it difficult to see the fruitfulness of such an evangelical appeal, launched by a poor hermit in love with God and humanity, such as was Charles de Foucauld.

That is why he left the Trappists.

He saw them to be too removed from people. He reconstituted them on a smaller scale alongside people. He wanted his followers to be Trappists in the midst of the suffering, the poverty, and the insecurity of the poor of our day. He wanted their sole concern to be the love of Christ made present in "permanent prayer" and continual "availability" to people.

But let's leave these things which I put badly and which you can find put well in the book *Seeds of the Desert*. Let's deal with simpler things which I, your brother and friend, can tell you.

To start with, I can tell you that I remember you all. In the long periods of adoration before the Blessed Sacrament — there is always Exposition here after work — your faces and your problems pass one by one through my mind. It is so easy here to remember everybody.

Then I can tell you again that I will pray for you and I shall be happy if you will entrust me with this task, especially for the things that are hardest and most burdensome for you. In this way I shall feel that I am battling alongside you again just as I used to do.

Forgive me for writing this communal letter. Basically it was a question of making the same introductory remarks, and it went against the grain to waste time repeating them all in a lot of letters.

Later on it won't be like that: it will give me real pleasure to get down to discussing with you matters which are woven deeply into our friendship, and our ideals of love for God and his Church.

Pray for me that I will be faithful to the call of Jesus — imperious as it was — so that I may achieve a life of effective evangelical witness and make up for such a dull and bombastic past.

I carry you with me in all love in my God-filled solitude.

Love, Carlo

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El Abiodh, January 21, 1955

Dearest Dolce and dear all,

First things first: *I'm happy, happy, happy and I feel like I'm fifteen years old.*

I got the feeling from Sr. Dolcidea's letter that you all (or she) were rather taken aback by the harshness of the life which we lead here. No, don't worry yourselves in the slightest, but believe me genuinely and literally when I say: *I'm happy*. It's true that life here is as tough as it is for those in the mountains, but

what does toughness matter? Mountain people enjoy it even when they sleep on a plank floor and eat out of a mess tin, don't they?

The life we lead is Spartan: sleeping on the floor and wearing permanently dirty overalls and not bothering with a tie don't matter...but the whole thing is accepted in such a carefree spirit of joy *that we feel sorry for those who peer into the mirror and worry about the color of their shirt*. The fact is that here we go back to school to *become poor*, and you know that poverty is apparently painful but really nothing less than a beatitude (blessed are the poor) and therefore a source of great, very great joy. What is more, it is a school for *freedom* and *detachment*, both of them divine and marvelous things.

Mamma, don't you worry about what I'm eating: I'm eating very well. To be sure, if you served at home some of the dishes served here...you would hear shrieks and see long faces. Of course there are things to laugh about. The most unthinkable things come out of the kitchen and we have the strangest possible menus. Imagine this for a lunch: starter: soup; main course: pasta; dessert: dates; or another: first course: boiled potatoes; main course: mashed potatoes; dessert: figs.

Now they want me to join the kitchen; I'm sure that even if I prepared the food with my feet I would be a hit. But this doesn't matter, and if I make the pasta too tasty they'll chase me out of the kitchen as a *tempter*.

You see, here we live like real workmen because we have to pick up our trade from the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. But I wouldn't have believed that I would find so much joy in freeing myself from so much vanity, superficiality, greed, and pretension.

Detachment from things leaves you with such a sense of *freedom!* You don't worry anymore whether you're ugly or handsome, bearded or beardless. Here it's rather almost a competition to get into the worst clothes and get rid of the slavery

of middle-class habits (would you believe that I trim my beard once a week, I who used to shave every morning?).

Obviously, all this is not a goal; *it's a means* toward eliminating every form of servitude, toward making us sturdy, toward learning to suffer, to work, *and to become simple because the gospel is for the simple* and is better understood that way.

All the complications of modern life, especially a rich one, are full of poison and, as I see more clearly now, they take people away from the gospel and *make them sad*.

That is the way it is and it is for this very reason that I am so happy.

The Lord *guided me well* and brought me to just the right place, and here I am experiencing my first spiritual benefits.

It's a pity that the time flies so quickly and already more than a month has gone by. I shall have to speed up because I've only a year of testing, and then I shall have to leave the desert and go back among people. A year is so little for backs as stiff as mine.

A few days ago I left the building site and became a farmer. I work with cabbages, potatoes, and salad vegetables. I've harvested the olives, and now I'm pickling them (eleven hundred pounds of olives entrusted to my skills). It's rather like the kitchen being entrusted to certain cooks who come out with soup for starters and pasta as a main course.

The weather is fine but very windy. If you could see the desert when the wind blows! You live in a cloud of sand: you breathe sand, you eat sand, your eyes are full of sand. But we also live here because sand is clean, not dirty. When they do not have water, the Arabs purify themselves before prayer by rubbing their hands and faces with sand; they think of it as water. I haven't yet got that far, but I'm getting there. A few days ago we had a holiday and I used it to make a twenty-mile walk into the desert. I climbed a little mountain from which the whole breadth of the Sahara can be seen. It was marvelous. Enough for now: I'll tell you the rest another time. . . . Love, Carlo

—*Letters to Dolcidia*

## A LITTLE BROTHER

Christmas Day 1955

I am a Little Brother. I buried the old Professor in the caves of the Col at Géryville. Now I am beginning a new life.

The most important feature of my spiritual life is my total renunciation of guiding myself, of concerning myself with and analyzing the procedures of my Christian life. I have relinquished all this to God.

From now on I want to keep my eyes on him, and him alone. He will take care of me. My act of faith must be complete and without second thoughts. Gifts have come for me too, but... I am afraid to open the parcel. We shall see in the days to come.

*Works!* Houses without the Father, churches without God, kitchens without a fire, bedrooms without love.

*Method!* Work makes you lose weight; poverty sets you free. So, having become light, you get used to praying. The least that can happen to you is that you take flight. And the desert which stretches away before you — awe-inspiring, silent, infinite — beckons you to seek its heart, where you will be alone, alone with your God.

Working priests and Little Brothers: a pastoral presence and a religious presence. — *The Desert Journal*



El Abiodh, March 1, 1955

Dearest Sr. Dolce and Sr. Emerenziana,

You are sad (and I'm pleased *because it is a sign of love*) that I haven't sent another personal word to the two of you. I'm doing so today because I have a little free time, since the blizzard of sand which has battered the desert for the last few days has rather changed our work schedule. At any rate, thank you for your most affectionate letters, accompanied as I feel they were by much impassioned prayer. *How dear and precious is our family, united as it is by the bond of mutual prayer!* I think

that it is difficult to escape that fact, and that the weaknesses of one member are immediately supplied by the prayers of another, and one member's crisis by another's eagerness, so that the whole team marches forward with confidence toward its Homeland. Don't you agree? . . .

You are waiting for a word from me, and that's certainly not difficult, especially nowadays that we have put on the same habit, the same discipline: religious life. You will surely want to know my impressions, my feelings about it, and so forth.

Here goes: there is nothing more *holy* or more *oppressive*, more *sublime* or more *stupid*, more *constructive* or more *useless* than the religious life. Everything depends on the spirit with which you tackle it.

The Rule? It can be a stairway to heaven or the most inhuman trap you can imagine. *Now I really understand what Jesus was telling the religious of his time: "The sinners and the tax-collectors will take their places before you!"* For them the religious life was a trap, and it was precisely with that that they killed Jesus. Because remember: the people who killed Jesus were the religious of his time, not the sinners and robbers.

As I was saying, it all depends on the spirit in which it is tackled.

For example, what is poverty, ratified and solemnly confirmed by a vow?

It's like all the other virtues: having within ourselves "the same mind as Jesus, who although his state was divine emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave, and became. . . ."

What can poverty become for the religious when it is taken on with a vow?

The solution to all financial problems, the absence of all worries, that happy calm in which everything is looked after and tomorrow is taken care of by gilt-edged securities in the bank.

That's the trap. What is there left resembling the drama of Mary and Joseph adrift in a foreign land, *really* poor and worried about where to find a bite of food for Jesus? The same goes

for all the rest, and in that rest lies an absolute betrayal of the religious life, the Church, and Christ.

Obedience? It can be a total, unconditional, joyous abandonment to our one King and Master: or it can be a school for cowardice and a priori rejection of the thing that costs a man dearest: personal responsibility. Isn't that so?

So, my dear sisters, I put it to you: given that we've got the experience, we've got the willingness to serve God, do we want in the years left to us to serve God here on Earth, to live out our vocation in depth, to make it a stairway to heaven? Nothing else matters anymore and we ought to burn all our boats behind us. There is no going back. Since we have chosen to be poor, let us live like the poor; since we have accepted virginity, let's live like virgins . . . and not just like single people; since we have accepted God, let us renounce the world.

How the desert speaks of these things to me! The desert, you see, is *just sand and sky*. *Down below sand which is death, up above a sky which is brighter than anywhere else*. If only you could see the stars here! How they sparkle! Now I understand why the Arabs have not lost their faith as Europeans have and why many European soldiers who came into contact with Arabs came back to God. It's the school of the desert.

When I have a free day, I take a lump of bread and a walking-stick and go off for the whole day. I travel twelve or so miles completely alone in this immense solitude and that way I'm alone with God. It's called *khalna* in Arabic and it means: to go into solitude.

Remember that one of the novitiate tests is to make a month of spiritual exercises like this. We set out and travel about 375 miles (Rome–Turin, more or less) toward Béni-Abbès, the oasis where Fr. Foucauld lived and found his vocation. It's the test of completely emptying one's mind, and they say it is startlingly effective in leading one to repentance and pure faith. When the time comes I'll tell you about it.

At the moment I'm still here, and I work and sing and pray. Above all do I pray. I would like to achieve real intimacy with God and remove the thick veil that divides us and causes my faith to be still so vague and unsure. The route here is the right one: the Blessed Sacrament is exposed almost all day long and the community gravitates toward it.

There is a great insistence here on searching for Jesus as a personal bridge to God. Basically it's the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word, the mystery that comes right up against us and of which we have to make use. There's no news of human affairs. The voice of the world does not get this far, it's all silence....

*How nice it would be to see you again.* It's strange how love grows here instead of fading away!

A big kiss from your Carlo



Assekrem, Christmas 1958

Dearest Dolce,

It's Christmas morning. Last night, after my annual spiritual exercises, I renewed my triennial vows. That means it's four years since I left Rome: one year at El Abiodh and three years divided between Berre and here in the Hoggar.

I'm not going to draw up an account of this period for you because I wouldn't know where to begin and, worse still, where to end. I can only tell you that I have found my way and that I am very happy.

I don't want to give you an apologia for the Little Brothers, and in any case I don't believe in formulae anymore, but I just want to tell you that for four years I've lived in an atmosphere where the gospel strikes a deeper chord, and that is all.

Here I'm left to get on with praying and my superiors are more concerned about my holiness than all my work. In short, I feel that what matters is the search for personal sanctity and union with God, not works.

And that's no small thing for a Congregation.

Yesterday evening a car arrived from Tamanrasset, and I had the joy of receiving your last letter of December 15.

I see that as usual you complain about my silence and I apologize profusely. You're not the only one left to complain about me.

It's strange, but throughout my life I have always found people eager to read what I write. It's really an act of great humility and patience, and I thank them all, but I don't think I will change much.

On the mainland my old friends hunt about for news of me, and I really can't understand why it matters to them. By now I'm a hermit and to a hermit time and space no longer exist. Don't you agree?

I'm not secretary to a mother general; I live in a cave built out of stone and mud and I've little to tell.

The desert is always the same, the sky is always beautiful, the road deserted.

What else can I say?

The only thing which is always new is God, but to talk about him you've got to be a very good and careful secretary and even so you don't always get anything. What's more, he likes to present us with long periods of pure faith during which there's nothing for it but to be silent and strive to love, to love as much as you can with this old and stinking flesh, from which only iniquity and wretchedness can be squeezed.

What would you like to say?

But today my heart is full of Jesus and I could write you a novel. How many things the Lord told me last night! Especially *one* which I want to tell you about immediately.

Do you want the secret of everything? Do you want a boiled-down summary of the gospel? Do you want a tiny, tiny, easy, easy formula for running, for flying onto the road to holiness?

Here it is:

*"Strive to love."*

I don't tell you to love, because it's not an easy thing. *To love* certain unlikable "Sisters" who are living and getting on alongside us, especially in a big house, is almost impossible. I tell you instead to "strive" to love because translating a precept into action is almost always done *on the Cross*. Nothing which is really good and holy is easy for us. It takes an effort. It is the Cross laid upon our poor hearts and at the touch of it life begins to flow again.

Seek every day — I'm telling you my suggestions from last night — some opportunity to love more both God and neighbor.

What results you'll see!

Jesus expects no more than that.

The whole of the Law and the Prophets is summed up as: *love — love*.

Try it and let me know.

In any case the advice does not come from me but from Jesus himself. Tomorrow I shall come down off the mountain and take to the road again. I think I will carry on working here for the time being. I have asked Fr. Prior if I may spend the rest of my life here, but I don't know what he will do with me. . . .

Carlo

— *Letters to Dolcidea*

## LEARNING TO LOVE

When I left for Africa to become a Little Brother of Jesus I lived for some time in Algiers, as the guest of an old friend.

I was very unsettled in those days, and the world appeared to me under quite a new light. It had something to do with that intuition born in the heart of him whom I now wanted to follow along the desert tracks, Charles de Foucauld.

The perspective of a European, materially and culturally endowed, desirous of giving and doing something for others, had turned somersaults in me. I would have liked to hide,

without money in my pocket, dressed as an Arab, among the anonymous crowd of poor Muslims seething in the alleys of Kasbah.

I remember that around midday I noticed a long string of men in rags lining up near the convent, whose walls were as solid as a fortress.

Each man had a tin can. I saw a door open and a nun in a white habit appear; nearby was an enormous smoking pot. It was time for the daily distribution of alms, and each man received his share along with a loaf of bread and warm soup.

I stared at that procession as though in a dream; as I watched those men and women branded with misery, tears ran down my cheeks, so that I could no longer see the bright sky above the African city.

I tried to find a place for myself. I had left my native land, urged on by the desire to give up everything in order to give myself to God among all this poverty; to search out among the poor the crucified face of Jesus, to do something for my wretched and despised brethren, so that, by loving them, I might deepen my union with God.

What was I to do then? Was I to open dispensaries and give bread, medicine, and education to these poor people? What was my place in the great evangelizing work of the Church?

I tried to learn from him who had drawn me to Africa, Charles de Foucauld. Quite small, quite humble, tin can in hand, I found him in my imagination, at the end of the queue. He was smiling faintly, as if he wanted to ask pardon for adding himself to the number of the deprived and underprivileged.

Undoubtedly, at that moment, in spite of my fear of suffering, my reluctance to bear the burdens of others, my fear of taking up the cross, I understood that my place, too, was there, amid the ragged poor, mixing in the mob.

Others in the Church would have the task of evangelizing, building, feeding, preaching. The Lord asked me to be a poor man among poor men, a worker among workers.

Yes, above all, a worker among workers, since the world of today was no longer in search of alms as in the time of Francis of Assisi, but a world in search of work, justice, and peace.

The world toward which I was journeying was the world in which real poverty is experienced. For people in that world, work is their sackcloth, but they have not chosen it; moreover it is painful, dirty, and poorly paid.

After a week spent at Taifet I left again for Tamanrasset. I felt that I could not bear that wretchedness and poverty any longer. In this I was poorer than those poor men, for I had been unable to bear what they had always borne.

I needed prayer. I longed to find myself alone in my hermitage where Jesus was exposed day and night, in order to unburden myself to him, beseech him, lose myself in him.

Above all I wanted to ask him to make me smaller, emptier, more transparent — and to enable me to return to Taifet.

Yes, return to Taifet to live the last years of my life. Have a little hut “like them,” no possessions but a mat and a blanket, “like them,” on the shore of that *oued* [riverbed], drag a little water from it with those *fogaras* which were continually breaking down as though laughing at our labor!

But also to have Jesus in the Host, hidden in the hut; to adore him, pray to him, love him, and obtain from him the strength not to rebel, not to curse, but to accept lovingly what the day would bring.

And so I pray for the day when on the shore of that *oued* a little cross will rise like a sentinel to watch over the solitude of those men as they wait, wait for others to come, and love them and help them to love.

— *Letters from the Desert*

## DREAMS, LOST AND FOUND

I'd gone off to Africa and joined the novitiate of the Little Brothers of Jesus at El Abiodh in Algeria.

I went to the Little Brothers of Father de Foucauld in response to a call to consecration heard in my heart and requiring a clear answer from me.

The idea of giving myself to the last and least of the earth, the poorest of the poor — the thought of merging myself in the dough of the world as living leaven — attracted me. I wanted to devote my existence to others and I wanted to do it where the going would be tough. The desert would be the perfect place, I thought. “Present to God, and present to people,” was the way the great mystic of the Sahara Charles de Foucauld put it, and I wanted to embody those two tensions at unity in a life where contemplation and action went hand in hand.

And there in the novitiate of the Little Brothers I began to dream, and dream, and dream.

Do you know what I dreamed about?

I dreamed about becoming a Little Brother and living the gospel among men and women who had need of me and my witness.

And who were these brothers and sisters of mine, in my dream?

Whenever we think of “others” we have no choice but to limit the picture in our mind, and narrow it down to some particular group of people, depending on our experience, and especially depending on our feelings.

One of us will think of the Chinese and say, “I’ll devote myself to the Chinese.”

Someone else thinks of the poor of the Third World with their starving babies, the peasants of Latin America, and decides, “I’ll devote myself to them.”

One of my fellow novices told me he wanted to sneak into a country behind the Iron Curtain and devote himself to the victims of atheistic propaganda.

Another one told me he would go to Hong Kong to work to build a Christianity that would be equal to face the problems of China when Hong Kong becomes part of China again.

Do you know what I wanted to do?

I was dreaming too and plans were taking shape in my heart and mind.

My dream was to go to the Alps and live with the Alpine rescue teams up on the Matterhorn and go with them to help people caught in storms.

Dreams don't happen by accident.

All my life I had been a mountain climber.

I'd been captain of an Alpine team, and the mountains were my passion.

I wanted to devote my passion to my fellow beings caught in the snow.

I wanted to be brother to Alpine guides and devote to their work, which is certainly not easy, my prayers and my service, as Jesus inspired me.

But I was only dreaming.

Do you know what happened to me in the middle of my dream?

I had to go on a four-hundred-mile hike through the Khaloua desert from El Abiodh.

I was not in very good condition and a male nurse, my friend, who took good care of me was concerned. "I'll give you some shots," he said. "You'll see, they'll keep you going."

"Fine," I said.

And with the best of intentions my friend stuck a needle in my thigh and injected me with a paralyzing poison. In less than twenty-four hours my leg was useless.

He had made a mistake.

He'd used the wrong vial.

It was stupid, but I would not say the nurse had been at fault except in the sense that he was impulsive and careless.

I didn't complain then, and I tried to keep cheerful if only to help the nurse whose fault it was not to go out of his mind. He was not as emotionally stable as I was.

I was paralyzed for life.

As soon as I felt a little better I started thinking things over. What about my dream now? What about the Alpine rescue team? Goodbye dream. Farewell any hope of ever climbing the Matterhorn. Suddenly I felt cheated.

How could I have been betrayed in this way?

I'd come to Africa to become a Little Brother.

I'd wanted to devote myself to people dying in snowstorms, I wanted to save them. Had I been wrong to want that?

What a perfectly miserable state of affairs!

How could the God I wanted to serve not reach out his hand when I needed him?

Why didn't he step in and stop such a simple, stupid mistake?

Why didn't he help me? Why did he let. . .

Sisters and brothers, let's stop for a moment. Let each of us think of our own suffering, our own trouble, our own paralysis, our own story. What am I doing here?

How did I get in this wheelchair?

What am I doing with this crutch?

How come I can't sleep at night?

How did I ever marry such a man, and then he abandons me to boot?

Why did that beam have to fall on me in the earthquake and crush my arm?

Why am I alone? What's wrong with just wanting to get married? And now there's no hope.

Why can't I draw just one easy breath of air?

Is someone else to blame for all this?

Or worse, is it because I'm so disordered inside?

And then, why does God, this so-called God, permit things like this? Why doesn't he step in in time?

Why did he just stand and watch while some idiot wretch beat me within an inch of my life and now I'll never be able to walk again?

Why didn't he make Herod die before he could carry out the slaughter in Bethlehem because Jesus was a thorn in his side?

Why didn't he step in and stop that storm blowing my hut away where I lived on the shore as a poor fisherman, as poor as Jesus himself?

Does this God exist or not?

Well, if he does, why doesn't he act, why doesn't he make an exception for me?

Here I came to serve him, and all he seems to do is mock me and let me turn into a cripple.

I thought it was a good idea to devote myself, as a mountaineer, to my fellow beings freezing to death in the snow!

And now what? What am I to do now?

Not join the Alpine rescue team, that's for sure!

So He's really switched things on me! Or could it be up to me to change plans?

Could be.

Thirty years have passed since then — thirty years since my dream went wrong.

Now here I am in front of you, and you have your dreams *too*, or have had them. And I can tell you something.

That mistaken injection that paralyzed my leg was not a stroke of bad luck. It was a grace.

Let's be precise. There's no point in pious platitudes.

It was bad luck, yes. It was a misfortune. But God turned it into a grace.

I had a useless leg. I could not climb. So I got a jeep and became a meteorologist.

Through no wish of my own, there I was where I belonged: in the desert.

Instead of trudging through the snow I trudged through the sand.

Instead of mountain passes I came to know caravan routes. Instead of chamois I saw gazelles.

Life suddenly appeared to me as it was, an immense personal exodus. Now I saw the desert as an extraordinary environment of silence and prayer.

My crippled leg helped me to “stand firm” (James 1:12).

I the runner — now stood firm.

I who’d always tried to do two things at once — now I stood firm. No doubt about it, it was a plus.

Deep down inside I began to understand that I hadn’t been cheated. Misfortune had thrust me upon new paths.

Brothers and sisters before me with your misfortunes, I testify to you of one thing only.

Today, thirty years after the incident that paralyzed my leg, I don’t say it wasn’t a misfortune.

I only say that God was able to transform it into a grace. I have experienced in my flesh what Augustine says: “God permits evil, so as to transform it into a greater good.”

God loves his children, and when he sees that someone or something has hurt them, what imagination he has — to transform the evil into good, inactivity into contemplation, the cry of pain into a prayer, grief into an act of love!

I know I’m only a child, telling you these things.

Smart people don’t tell you. They’re embarrassed.

Well, I’m going to come right out and tell you.

I’ve found no other answer to my pain.

And I know it by experience. You can be happy with a crippled leg.

Very happy.

In my experience the wounds of poverty and suffering produce a special, very precious, very sweet honey.

It’s the honey of the Beatitudes proclaimed by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.

I have tasted this honey and have become convinced of the rationality of the gospel, of the reasons for so many mysterious things.

I have been convinced by experience.

I have come to believe in God through experience, and I always say: I believe in God because I know him.

And from suffering too.

There is still plenty of room for mystery. And it is right that this should be so, to educate us in humility, which is so important in our relationship with the Absolute that is God. But the thickest cloak that weighed on my misery and my blindness God has torn away, and the nakedness of my wounded flesh has helped me to recognize, out beyond the veil of mystery, the nakedness of God.

Only then, startled by joy, did I know the truth, that the encounter with the Eternal is possible. And that it is stupendous.

— *Why O Lord?*