

3.2 A Large Family Origins

When Charles de Foucauld died in Tamanrasset on December 1, 1916, there were 49 people including himself, on the list of members of the Union of Brothers and Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, which he had worked to set up during the last years of his life, and for which he had written the Directory. The Secretary of the Union, Father Laurain wrote: "Now everything has been destroyed by his death", and everybody thought the group, which had scarcely started, would disappear. Everybody except one man, Louis Massignon (1882-1962), who was to gain an international reputation as a specialist in Islam. He had first met Charles de Foucauld in 1909, and corresponded with him until his death. He did everything he could to keep the Union alive, as his "older brother" would have wished. He published the Directory. He launched the Charles de Foucauld Association for which he secured authorisation from Cardinal Amette. And above all, he "commissioned", to use his own word, Rene Bazin, to write a biography of Brother Charles. That book, which was published in 1921 under the title "Charles de Foucauld, Explorer in Morocco, Hermit in the Sahara" was the first to draw a portrait of Charles de Foucauld and present the core of his message. It was as a result of this biography that spiritual groups and religious congregations began. They all found support and advice from the Association and from Louis Massignon. Louis Massignon gradually distanced himself from the Association itself, but until his death, continued to lead a group of men and women, lay people, religious brothers, sisters and priests, who drew their inspiration from the spirituality of the Directory. In 1947, he named the group the "Sodality of the Directory". Today this original group is called "Sodality Union" and has members in all five Continents. The First Groups. When Bazin's book was published, lay people were the first to hear the call. Brother Charles had voiced repeatedly: "We need Christians like Priscille and Aquila doing good in silence". From 1923 onwards, Suzanne Garde began to think of a form of presence in North Africa: 20 "Evangelisation would be done by women. They could begin with a dispensary, a sewing workshop, and with everything that would make the Arabs appreciate us." This was the beginning of the Charles de Foucauld Group in Algeria, first in Tlemcen, then in El Bayad, then, after 1945, in Dalidah, near the Tunisian border. It had to withdraw to France because of the Algerian War of Independence, and in 1968, it based itself in Bon Encontre, near Agen (France). In the same years, the group of Nurses of Our Lady of Carthage (Notre Dame de Carthage) was formed in Tunisia at the suggestion of the Bishop of Carthage and Tunis. In 1924, this same Bishop had conferred the habit of Charles de Foucauld on Charles Henrion and Emile Malcor. The last members of the group of nurses had to withdraw and return to France in 1961, (with Father Henrion) and settled in Villecroze (France). Today there is one Sister who lives in an old people's home, but the group as such no longer exists. Still in the same period, in 1927, Father Albert Peyriguere settled in Morocco. He had first tried to live in Algeria with a companion, following the Rule drafted by Charles de Foucauld in 1889. He remained in El Kbab in the Moroccan Middle Atlas region until his death in 1959. Father Michel Lafon continued this presence as a "monk-missionary", as Charles de Foucauld described himself, an expression that Father Peyriguere made his own. A few years later, the first religious communities appeared. In August 1933, the Fraternity of the Little Sisters of the Sacred Heart was founded

by Sister Marie-Charles, near Montpellier(France). A month later, Rene Voillaume and four other brothers received the habit of the Little Brothers of Jesus, and founded their first fraternity in Algeria. In 1939, in Algiers, Little Sister Magdeleine and a companion made their vows as the Little Sisters of Jesus, and based themselves in Touggourt(Algeria) among the nomads. With differing emphases, all three groups were intended to be contemplative and missionary communities. The Little Brothers of Jesus and Little Sisters of the Sacred Heart lived at first in a 'monastic' form. But after World War II (for the former), and the second Vatican Council (for the latter), they changed their lifestyles, and small fraternities were set up in working class neighbourhoods – something the Little Sisters of Jesus were already doing. The keyword was 'Nazareth' as a form of religious life: to seek God by taking the path that Jesus took, which was that of sharing ordinary, daily life. Fraternities were established in disadvantaged or extremely marginalized environments in all four corners of the world. Even though the group no longer exists today, we should also mention the Union of Nazarenes of Charles de Foucauld founded in 1947 in Bordeaux (France) by Magdeleine de Vimont. She was touched when she read the Directory, and also deeply moved by contact with the mentally ill to whom her group was initially dedicated. The publication of *In the Heart of the Masses*, and new developments. In 1950, Father Voillaume published *In the Heart of the Masses*. This book described the life of the Little Brothers of Jesus, their way of following Brother Charles and their understanding of his message. Because there was a need to explain what appeared at the time as a novelty, he stressed the vocation of every Christian to a life of friendship with God, and the paths to take in order to lead a contemplative life "at the heart of the world". This book had considerable influence, and was translated into many languages. It was through this book that many people came to know Charles de Foucauld and his spirituality. Father Voillaume also acted as an adviser to the groups that began at this time. In 1950, Mgr de Provençères, bishop of Aix-en-Provence, gave official recognition to the Lay Fraternity of Charles de Foucauld (initially called Charles de Foucauld Fraternity). But in fact, many years earlier, in several cities in France, groups of Christians (men and women, single and married, lay people and priests) had begun to meet regularly to help one another follow Jesus and live the Gospel in the spirit of Brother Charles. Today, the Lay Fraternity is present on every Continent, and new groups are formed every year. In terms of numbers it is the largest group in the family,. Within this group, some priests had begun to meet among themselves with a desire to give their lives and their priestly ministry the evangelical 'flavour' of Brother Charles. A Union of priests was formed, which took the name of Priests Fraternity Jesus Caritas in 1976. Today it is present on every Continent 22 In the same years, some young Christian women felt a call to a contemplative life lived in celibacy, bound by vows, while keeping their professional commitments in society, and without taking the form of a religious life in community. The Jesus-Caritas Fraternity was thus formed by Marguerite Poncet in 1952. It was given official recognition as a Secular Institute for women. From this group the Charles de Foucauld Fraternity was created in 1991, as an association of lay women, committed in celibacy. From the experience of the Little Brothers of Jesus, Father Voillaume then thought of communities that would be able to take charge of the sharing of the Good News with more disadvantaged people and their human development. In 1956, he founded the Little Brothers of the Gospel, then, in 1963, the Little Sisters of the Gospel. The Beni-Abbès Meeting (1955) and the Spiritual Family of Charles de Foucauld

Association Faced with the rapid increase in the number of groups related with Charles de Foucauld, the need was felt for "a meeting that would make fraternal unity concrete, with respect for the diversity of vocations and in a communal fidelity to the message left by Brother Charles" (as Little Sister Magdeleine said). Also, in the context of decolonisation, some groups, particularly in France, were tempted to make Charles de Foucauld appear as a defender of 'Christian civilisation' against the move towards independence by the peoples of the Maghreb (North Africa). There was a desire to set up a representative association that could respond and show that the message of the 'universal brother' could not be distorted or used for ends contrary to his intentions. So a meeting was organised in Beni-Abbes from November 14 to 16, 1955. It was led by Mgr Mercier, the bishop of the Sahara, who welcomed the meeting, and by Louis Massignon. Mgr De Provençères, the Bishop of Aix en Provence, who had been a friend and protector of the different groups from the beginning, also took part, as did Mgr Duperray, the bishop of Montpellier, Fr Peyriguere and representatives (often the founders) of the different groups then in existence. Sharing and prayer were the hallmark of this meeting pilgrimage. It was decided to create the Charles of Jesus - Father de Foucauld Association. Its aim was "to express the unity of the spirituality that inspires the different groups that claim kinship with the 23 religious thought and spirituality of Brother Charles; to make known the personality and writings of their founder; and to defend, if need be, his memory and the meaning of his message against the distortions to which they are exposed". It was also decided that the Jesus Caritas bulletin would be a link among all the groups, expressing their common spirituality. Today the Association is known as the Spiritual Family of Charles de Foucauld Association. It regularly receives new members. Although not an essential characteristic, it is worth noting that all the new groups were formed outside France – in Europe first of all, and then on other Continents. The Family is still growing. August 15, 1966 is the official birthday of the Little Sisters of Nazareth, in Ghent, Belgium. They were a group of young women, active in the working world through their membership of the Catholic Young Workers movement, who wanted to live both the message of Brother Charles and of Cardinal Cardijn, and find a form of religious life characterised by sharing ordinary working class life. They wanted to proclaim to everyone they met in their life and activity that "your life is worth more than all the gold in the world". Also in the early 1960s, in Catalonia (Spain), both The Spiritual Itinerary of Charles de Foucauld (by Jean Francois Six), and Father Peyriguere's letters made a strong impression on Pedro Vilaplana. He became the focus of a community of young people who consecrated themselves to the Lord, either in married life (each household constituting a fraternity) or in celibacy, in small fraternities. The first commitments were made in 1968, constituting the Community de Jesus. In 1969, in the diocese of Foligno (Italy), the bishop gave official recognition to a new community that had started in his Diocese: la Community of the Little Brothers of Jesus Caritas, founded by Giancarlo Sibilia. This included priests who wanted to live in a monastic community with strong fraternal ties while serving in various pastoral ministries for the dioceses. Thousands of miles from there in Haiti, the Little Brothers and Sisters of the Incarnation were formed (the Brothers in 1976, the Sisters in 1985) with Franklin Armand and Emmanuelle Victor. In that country 24 marked by difficulties of all sorts, they wanted to be "peasants with the peasants, for the sake of Jesus and his Gospel", and work for the development and evangelisation of the rural world. In the diocese of Bangui (Central Africa), a religious community of women began in 1977: the Little

Sisters of the Heart of Jesus. In one of the poorest countries on the planet, shaken by political troubles for years, a fraternal presence given to prayer, welcoming every person, and placing itself at the service of the people, constitutes a welcome haven of peace. In 1980, in Canada, a monastic community, Little Brothers of the Cross, was founded by Father Michel Verret (Brother Michel Marie of the Cross). Following Brother Charles, they wanted to lead a fraternal 'family' life in the setting of a monastery, ready to welcome and accompany all who come to their door. The most recent group to join the family was founded in Vietnam in the early 1980s, with a view to at becoming a Secular Institute. The Vietnamese name, whose acronym is TSGTT, means Secular Institute of the Missionaries of Jesus the Servant. The group includes a branch for men as well as one for women, and also a branch for associates. This is a rather large Family for a man who died alone! And the Family of those who find inspiration for their lives in Charles de Foucauld is not limited to the membership of the Association. Other groups exist, which are often integrated in the Family at a local level. Some groups have disappeared, others are created. And many others who are not part of any group see in Brother Charles a beloved personality who, inspired by the spirit of the Gospel and humanity, touches their inner selves and sets them on their way to a profound spiritual search. The Association now holds its general assembly every two years. That is an opportunity for the leaders of the different groups to exchange and meet. An elected team ensures coordination between meetings. During their lives people such as Mgr de Provencheres, Father Voillaume, and Little Sister Magdeleine have significantly influenced these meetings and the life of the Association. Today leaders of the Association and representatives of the members are trying to deepen the message of Brother Charles, and to discover the wealth and diversity of the responses given by each group to that message. Although different they 25 recognise that as each branch is inspired by a common spirit, like a rainbow, all the colours are needed to display its full splendour. The sense of being united in the Family of Brother Charles has grown in the past years. Now in most countries, December 1st is a milestone opportunity for members of the spiritual Family in each country to gather and meet. Moreover, in many countries the spiritual Family organise activities together so as to show forth the spirituality of Brother Charles to the world and the Church as was the case during recent celebrations of the Beatification of Brother Charles (November 13, 2005). The Association often plays an important role in facilitating contacts.