

## **“The Second Call” by René Voillaume<sup>1</sup>**

**Text given to the priests of the Diocese of Rome  
by Pope Francis for Holy Thursday 2023**

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**Introduction available at [Contemplative in the Mud](#)**

*Saint-Gildas Island,<sup>2</sup> March 17, 1957*

Before Easter arrives, I am taking advantage of a few days of calm on Saint-Gildas Island to write to you at length, in order to share with you a few remarks that I have had occasion to make to our communities in recent months. What I want to share now with everyone pertains to our fidelity to the Lord and to his call, in big and small things, in the middle of the journey travelled in religious life as well as at its beginnings.

The risk that emerges over the long haul for us, as for any human enterprise, is that of a certain wear and tear of the ideal pursued and of the effort made to achieve it—wear and tear which would lead us to settle for mediocrity in holiness. With time and maturity comes the temptation to compromise between the supernatural demands of the Lord’s love and those of our adult personality. Each year sees a greater number of us arrive at this decisive stage of spiritual life, a stage where the choice must be made one last time between Jesus or the world, the heroicness of charity or mediocrity, the cross or a certain comfort, holiness or a honest fidelity to religious commitment. It is at this same maturity that the community of Fraternities<sup>3</sup> itself also arrives.

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<sup>1</sup> René Voillaume, *Lettres aux fraternités I. Témoins silencieux de l’amitié divine* (Paris: Cerf, 1964), 11–34.

<sup>2</sup> This island is in Brittany, France.

<sup>3</sup> “Fraternities” is the term used to refer to the small groups of Little Brothers of Jesus, usually two to four, who live together and work in jobs outside their home, like the poor of whatever region they find themselves in.

Am I the only one to have felt this danger of weakening and this anguish in the face of the greatness of the work that Jesus would like to do through his Little Brothers, by noting what we do in reality with the demands of his call to follow him worldwide? Today, with what I am saying here, I am speaking to older professed brothers, more than to novices or young professed brothers—although the latter also have everything to gain from considering, with realism and courage, what will be for them, in the near future, the demands of their religious life.

Learning to generously take the successive stages of Christ's growth into us and upon us is as important as having started well by leaving everything to follow Jesus, during the first call which led us to the novitiate. This perseverance is essential, because there is no point in starting if you don't follow through. Brother Charles of Jesus<sup>4</sup> remained faithful all his life to this family motto which was dear to him: "When you leave to do something, you must not come back without having done it." The whole point is not to leave the boat and the nets to follow Jesus for just a little while, but rather to go to Calvary, to receive the lesson and the fruit of its tree, and to continue with the help of the Holy Spirit to the end of one's life—which must end in the perfection of divine charity.

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It is more important than we often think to have properly understood the Lord's response to his apostles, who were surprised at the difficulty inherent in the path of the evangelical counsels: "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible" (Mk 10:27 NRSV; cf. Lk 24; Mt 19:26).<sup>5</sup> This observation of the Lord and this promise full of hope do not apply only to the abandonment of riches and to chastity, but to *all* the requirements of religious life: to obedience, to prayer, to charity. Certainly, we have from the beginning believed what the Lord said. But we believed without understanding how far this would lead us in our own personal, all-too-concrete case, and without understanding how such an impossibility would manifest itself in us. From this point of view, it seems to me that we could distinguish three stages in the normal evolution of a religious life.

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<sup>4</sup> That is, Saint Charles de Foucauld (1858–1916), the inspiration for, though not direct founder of, the Little Brothers of Jesus.

<sup>5</sup> In Father Voillaume's original, there are no verses specified for Luke's Gospel.

In the first stage, we have not yet experienced the human and natural *impossibility* of living in harmony with the supernatural order of the evangelical counsels. In youth, there is in fact a correspondence between the youngster's normal, temperamental generosity and the call of Jesus to leave everything to follow him. At that time, poverty, chastity, obedience, prayer, charity do not seem to us to present insurmountable difficulties. Moreover, the divine pedagogy of the Master who calls us will itself contribute to keeping us somewhat within the bounds of a temporary illusion, without which perhaps no one would have the courage to leave everything to follow Jesus and carry his cross. Not to mention that, in this period of youth, the demands of holiness appear to us more under the aspect most in tune with our senses and not our more spiritual character—I was going to say under their natural aspect of realization, but I checked myself. Poverty, for example, will appear to us more as a kind of denudation of material things. We will even be demanding in this area, and for many it will be like a need, rooted in our bodily appreciation, whose satisfaction will give them real joy. Jesus expands our hearts in this sense, and this is what he wants from those who are just starting out. We also have very personal ideas on this subject—because it is difficult not to have them when we are young, and because natural and spontaneous aspirations push us to be poor in this particular way or that particular way. Material deprivation does not scare us.

It is the same with obedience, the true demands of which are still veiled from us. Religious life is still new; it lies before us. As long as we feel we have something to learn from our older brothers, we are spontaneously docile, and we easily trust the Brothers designated as our "Responsibles."<sup>6</sup> I do not want to say that there are no difficulties whatsoever at this stage, but we do not yet know everything that is contained in the mystery of obedience.

As for chastity, we perhaps have those difficulties common to young people, but we are not afraid of the future, and our hearts are easily filled by the love we have for Jesus—a love which, up until this point, has always manifested itself in a more or less sensitive, emotional way. To a warning like that of Jesus to Peter, we would not hesitate to respond like the apostle, and without any hesitation: "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death" (Lk 22:33 NRSV). This is not a problem

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<sup>6</sup> This is a word much more common and understandable in French, but I have decided to keep it rather than try to interpret it into everyday English usage. None of the nuances matter here. That these are people appointed to be in charge is all that matters.

for us yet. Of course, there are hard times. Those days come. But they pass, and then—the Lord is there by our side again. The Gospel still appears to us to be rich in many things that we discover every day, and theological study allows us to penetrate with wonder into the grandeur of the mysteries of God. We are happy to have been called by Jesus, and we have no doubt that we can remain faithful to him.

Charity, likewise, seems easy to us. There are issues. We are perhaps accused of major faults which it seems to us that we will easily overcome with a few generous reviews of our life and with the help of our brothers. But they are just some issues on the side. In the main, we note significant progress during the novitiate and during the first years of our life as a Little Brother. But in reality, under the surface, there is still a whole dimension of charity that escapes us, and we clumsily cause suffering through lack of delicacy. Our charity is still very human, very naturally spontaneous, and we feel within ourselves movements of universal sympathy. It seems very simple to us to become the brother of these people so different from us, who attract us to go far away.<sup>7</sup> We can't wait to be among them, as one of them! Everything about them seems good and sympathetic to us and we feel entirely capable of giving them our friendship. We do not allow anyone to criticize them, and we harshly condemn those who seem less enthusiastic to us. Of course, this does not prevent us from being unbearable to others and from becoming discouraged at the first difficulty. But we do not think about it often. At any rate, this deficiency is far from being obvious to us.

As for prolonged and silent prayer, this is certainly what, at the beginning, appeared to us, with some exceptions, to be the most difficult. But the graces of the novitiate and our desire to demonstrate our love to Jesus have kept us faithful. We also have there received some luminous graces, and it seems to us that with a little good effort will we will easily maintain this proof of love that we want to give

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<sup>7</sup> It is the vocation of the Little Brothers of Jesus to live a life of contemplation and friendship in the world. They take on typical work of the poor or the labourers in their area, and they often are sent to Fraternities in locales far from their own culture. In the initial period, many French Brothers in particular ended up all over the world, living like locals in areas as far-ranging as slums in Latin America and India, tribes in the Congo, and fishing boats off the coasts of Europe. Inculturation and a culture of encounter constituted their mission well before Vatican II. In recommending a text specific to the Little Brothers as a model for all his priests, the Bishop of Rome seems to be saying that there is something universal about their mode of life which he wants all his clergy, if not the entire lay faithful, to pay attention to.

to the Lord. We are easily moved by the suffering of people we encounter and by the evil around us, and we want to bring this before the Lord in prayer. We find help there, and we sometimes fear that a lack of contact with people will remove one of the sensitive, emotional reasons which push us to more generosity in prayer.

Yes, indeed, it seems to us that we have got a handle on all these demands of the life of a Little Brother, which we discovered during the novitiate and the first years of life in the Fraternity. It seems to us that we can be faithful to it with a little courage. In any case—and even on the dark days, for there are some now and then—this has not yet appeared to us as radically impossible, as the Lord predicted to us. Difficult, yes, oh yes. Impossible, really, truly impossible—no, with a little courage, we've got this! Or so we say...

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Now, with time and the grace of the Lord, little by little, everything changes. Human enthusiasm gives way to a sort of insensitivity to supernatural realities. The Lord seems more and more distant to us, and on certain days we feel as if we are overcome by weariness. We are more easily tempted to decide to pray less. Or sometimes we approach prayer merely as a matter of course. Chastity causes us difficulties that we had not envisaged; some temptations are new; we feel a sense of heaviness within us, we seek sensual satisfaction more easily. On top of that, we would tend—instinctively and without even noticing it or seeing the harm in it—to lead a slightly more independent life, without taking into account our Responsibilities. Openness seems less necessary to us, charity more difficult. Adapting to another people sometimes leaves us discouraged; we only see faults which irritate us, where we found everything good at the beginning. We start to criticize easily. We cannot speak the language fluently or even understand it sufficiently.<sup>8</sup> Poverty becomes hard on us. We care more about our ideas. Some days we regret not being able to eat better, and not feeling freer. Finally, we would like to do something more interesting with our lives! And always, throughout it all,

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<sup>8</sup> These last points should be understood, for other vocations, as related to the difficulties of community and inculturation incumbent on anyone who shifts community and culture even in the slightest. The form they manifest for the Little Brothers is particular, perhaps extreme, but not without parallels elsewhere.

the Lord is silent—silent, and no longer lavishing on us the sensitive, emotional joys of intimacy, joys which once upon a time gave us so much ease, leading us to consider everything, all the obstacles and difficulties, with optimism.

Well, what happens now is that we come to feel all this is normal, without there having been serious infidelity on our part, nor abandonment on the part of the Lord. Even if we have remained fundamentally faithful to the demands of our religious life, we must come, more or less, to feel these various impressions or temptations.

In a word, *we are gradually entering a new phase of our lives*, discovering, to our cost, that the demands of religious life are impossible. We experience that poverty must not only be material, but result in detachment from ourselves and from any interesting action. Chastity in depth, obedience with all its consequences, charity up to the complete gift of ourselves to others, a whole life centered on the contemplative value of adoration—all of this we are gradually coming to experience as *impossible* for us, that it is beyond our strength, contrary to the natural development of our instincts and personality.

Yes, it's impossible! Jesus told us this, but the assertion appears to us now in a different light, and at the very moment when Jesus is distant, as if noticeably absent from our life! Humanly, he is no longer there. We can no longer count on the youthful enthusiasm that the years have worn away in us.

This impossibility may not have appeared to us suddenly and in such a brutal manner on all the points that I have mentioned. But, more or less consciously, it will become obvious to us. Perhaps we do not dare to admit this to ourselves, because that would force us to take a clear position: What to do now? How do we get out of this?

If we do not frankly and squarely approach this stage—this awareness of the radical impossibility for human forces to live a supernatural religious life, and to serve Christ with his cross—we are in serious danger of either falling into a latent discouragement, or deluding ourselves by lowering our ideal to what could only be called a humanly acceptable, livable, possible level. However, this is what happens

most often at this crucial stage of religious life: *discouragement*, or *the semi-conscious acceptance of mediocrity*. Because, to make religious life livable, we will have in fact conceded the introduction of a derivative instead of the real thing. We are looking for a centre of human interest, a reason for living which is reconcilable with both keeping up the appearances of religious life and the honest observance, basically, of our commitments. If we refuse this compromise—through lucidity and to remain fully faithful to the Lord—we are expected to become discouraged. Truly, Jesus makes us experience to the full, and in an unexpected way, the impossibility of following the path on which he himself has set us!

What is even more confusing is that the more generous and faithful we are to grace, the more impossible this path will appear to us! Indeed, the demands of poverty, of interior self-emptying, of chastity, of obedience, and of charity, appear to us in a new light, and these demands are greater than we had imagined.

But it is an inestimable grace to see an increasingly infinite horizon open before us, because it is proof that Jesus is there with his light. On this path, which has now become so austere, how could we not be discouraged by the immensity of the distance which separates us from the goal? This goal seemingly having moved farther away, we have all the difficulty in the world to believe that we have not gone backwards, but rather forwards. Everything, in fact, happens as if we had gone backwards. It seems to us that we have failed. As regards the religious and priests who surround us, we have also discovered their faults, their imperfections—and we can find, we can feel, many of them, no doubt. What's the point of trying the impossible? It just remains for us, since it is impossible for us to be perfect, to live an honest life. An honest life following Jesus crucified—how disappointing, and what disillusionment!

And yet, if we knew what Jesus expects of us at this critical moment in our religious life—if we knew what he expects from a stage which is not a regression as we imagine, but rather the establishment of the conditions for a new beginning, for the discovery of a life according to the spirit and the faith, with the conviction, which remains for us to acquire, that such a life is then *possible with Jesus*.

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I have suddenly realized, in recent days, that my anxiety came from the fact that more and more of us were reaching this decisive stage. This is the moment when, standing on the rough surface of the sea, we begin to sink, because we are afraid. Afraid of what, though? Was it not at the very command of Jesus that we began to walk in just such conditions? In fact, we did not really know. However, everything has happened so far as it was supposed to, and the adolescence of our spiritual life is coming to an end.

Living according to the spirit, in the stripping of the spirit, according to an ambition for greatness that is detached from our own selves and which expands by the very ambition of the Heart of Jesus, in humility and distrust of ourselves, finally accepting to be nothing in ourselves, everything for him and for others, agreeing to believe against all hope and to persevere in prayer, perhaps knocking on a door that will remain closed for years, agreeing to start again, in a new perspective, towards a new way of being poor, obedient, chaste, charitable, prayerful—this is what this new stage will be.

However, we no longer find reasons for comfort within ourselves. To avoid getting discouraged we will have to stop looking at ourselves, and know how to rediscover Jesus, who has not ceased to be present—but whose presence is very different from what it was before.

Our whole life will seem to us as if hanging by a thread. To make matters more precarious, we cannot see this thread enough to see its solidity. Like a nylon thread, it seems so thin and transparent to us that we lose the impression of security that we had at the beginning of our religious life. Like the mountaineer overcome by dizziness, we no longer have the right to look down, to follow with our eyes the wall to which we are clinging, under penalty of falling off or no longer being able to move forward. We are condemned to looking only upwards, or not succeeding at all.

Believing that Jesus spoke the truth by affirming that “this is possible with God” is what remains for us to discover, and to live, so as to make this third step possible.

A great number of us are there. I feel the risk and I would like everyone to commit



to intense prayer to protect us from the other danger: falsification of religious life under intact appearances.

How many of us will “settle” like this? It’s a secret that only Jesus knows, and I prefer not to think about it, because I can’t accept that any of you are among those caught in arrested development... and yet, given the large numbers involved, is it not inevitable that some will end up like this?

Well, at any rate, I refuse to admit it when I think of each of you one by one, because each of us has been called and remains free, after all, before the Lord, free to say “yes” to Him again at the beginning of this new stage. Is not the freedom of love capable of overcoming this probability game with large numbers? I hope. But above all I would like you to be convinced that this discouragement, this heaviness of your spiritual life, of which you feel the temptation or even the beginnings within you, does not forebode the end of something generous, but, on the contrary, is the sign of a new call from the Lord.

One step has been taken; there remains another, which this time will be decisive. We must never say we are disillusioned with religious life, but rather humble enough to admit ourselves defeated by Christ, humiliated, and crucified. We have become humble enough to accept to enter a new path, that of the spirit, of faith, and of a strong love free of illusions.

The change of plan, the transfer of regime, consists of having finally understood that religious life as a Little Brother was humanly impossible, that God had to take charge and make us understand it, and that everything remained possible for God, in faith and divine charity. In a word, we must die with Jesus and live again with him. All religious life is in this death and this life, but we had not imagined that it would happen like this!

Once committed to this new plan, a new light will show us new requirements for putting into practice the counsels of Jesus, which we will have to pursue with renewed generosity too, because it will no longer be based on any sensitive, emotional enthusiasm.

In any case, if we want to continue moving forward, we will have to surrender our entire spirit to poverty, chastity, obedience, and prayer, with a view to a continual increase in love. It is our will that we must deliver up anew. The effort at the beginning of our religious life must be renewed, because the seat of love is in our free will, and this belongs totally to us, as it is also what must be invaded by the life that communicates to us the humanity of Jesus.

But this work of discipline, in this second beginning, will undoubtedly concern deeper, more essential areas of our spirit. It is difficult to compare these new events to those of the first beginning, because our needs, our desires, our deep instincts, now have other objects. Knowing ourselves for what we are has revealed certain obstacles and deeper roots. The generous effort of a novice and that of a perpetually professed person will therefore not be exercised in the same way. We must not judge each other, but try to understand. It would not be good for a novice to want to live like a mature religious, nor for a perpetually professed person to want to live like a novice again. And this is indeed so, provided that each person surrenders without reluctance, guards himself against the illusions specific to his stage of the spiritual life, and heeds the call to the total renunciation that Christ never ceases to ask of us.

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In recent months, some professed brothers have left the Fraternity. It is normal that this is so, and, far from being a cause of trouble for us, this should appear to us as an indication of truth and vitality. It is a heavy responsibility to advise a vocation or to try to see clearly when admission to first profession or perpetual profession is right. It is difficult for certain errors not to occur. Certainly, some Little Brothers may be led to leave, precisely because they have not been able to cross over into a new stage of maturity in the spiritual life. Our vocation is difficult. It finds insufficient support except in the giving over of oneself to the work of the Holy Spirit. But it is also possible that other kinds of errors can arise, and the requirements of the vocation of a Little Brother fully faithful to his ideal may not appear right away.

It also seems to me that the slow discovery of the different kinds of life that Jesus asked the Fraternities to lead in the world is coming to an end. A certain amount of

time was necessary to reveal all the consequences of the ideal of the Fraternities, and to allow us to further specify their contemplative requirements. Many features of this ideal became clearer, more precise, as the other forms of life parallel to those of the Fraternities—the Secular Institutes and the Little Brothers of the Gospel, with their combination of more active ministry with our own contemplative vocation of friendship—were born. The Fraternities had to reach a certain age in their development, and only then could the needs to which they responded appear more precisely. Depending on the environment, the new problems generated by their mere presence also came to light, but only after some time.

This is how the Fraternity also arrives, *as a community*, at an important stage of its maturity, and we must all come face to face with our essential contemplative ideal in order to generously realize its demands.<sup>9</sup>

As we come to take stock of this development in the life of the Fraternities, I would not like some of you to give in to the temptation of preferring for yourself a solitary and independent evangelical life, rather than accepting the limits of a humanly organized institution. The message of love and renunciation, of evangelical poverty and prayer, cannot be transmitted to a large number of souls, except through an ecclesial institution. That is just how things work.

At this time in history, God has willed the Fraternities as an institution of the Church, with a view to propagating through them a life and a spirit according to the Gospel. In this way, a greater number can, through this institution of which we are a part, have some contact with and access to holiness.

This organic growth is certainly not without risks that we know well: development of a rule, costly dispersion, development of a minimum of central administration,

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<sup>9</sup> If these paragraphs have been included by Pope Francis, what should be taken for a more general reflection are two themes. There is first the notion, dear to the pope, that time is greater than space, that is, it is more important to set processes in motion than to iron things out into a fixed structure (cf. *Lumen Fidei* 57; *Evangelii Gaudium* 222–225). Second, there is the notion of discernment as a community. The pope is not addressing individuals alone, but also his community of priests as a whole. Although each person or part matters dearly, the whole remains greater than the part (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium* 234–237).

training and study centers. But how can we refuse all of this without refusing something that was thought, imagined, and willed by Christ? We will always address to religious congregations which are developing the same reproaches that we throw at the Church itself because of its organization, and yet the Church is thus, despite its human faults, such as Christ willed it, with his divine will, to be.

I pray to the Lord that all of us may, in this perspective, be found faithful to the grace of new birth according to the spirit which will be given to each of us and to the entire Fraternity at this coming Easter.

*Dijon Railway Station, March 24, 1957*

I have just sent you my letter from Saint-Gildas dated March 17, on what I could call “the second call of Jesus.” This call which makes us return to him in the full maturity of our human and spiritual life. It is only from this moment that we truly and totally belong to God. But I don’t think I’ve told you everything.

I am often concerned about this continual and double requirement of our life: to detach ourselves from everything and, nonetheless, to give our life to human beings.<sup>10</sup> Because that’s what it is. There is no way to avoid these contradictory aspects of our religious consecration.

Yes, we must detach ourselves from everything, hold on to nothing, absolutely nothing, as if we were going to enter the novitiate of a Chartreuse! It is this “nothing,” this *nada nada y en el monte nada* of Saint John of the Cross which Father de Foucauld<sup>11</sup> gave such a vigorous commentary in his personal reflection, including the chapter of his rule.<sup>12</sup> He calls it “detachment from everything that is

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<sup>10</sup> This double aspect of course has a particular manifestation in the dual life of contemplation and friendship that is that of the Little Brothers of Jesus. But it has its analogues in every Christian life.

<sup>11</sup> Again, Saint Charles de Foucauld.

<sup>12</sup> This rule was never used by any actual community. It was written by Charles when he was alone. The Little Brothers tried adopting and adapting it for a while during their early stage in the

not God”—and yes, that’s right. Detachment from everything whatsoever that is not God—therefore, human affairs and also our fellow human beings themselves.

To break away from our brothers—how is that possible? I know a number of Christians would revolt if they heard me speak like this. And yet it is true. Being detached from what we find in selfish satisfactions in human relationships, human love, even friendship, does not mean ceasing to love people with the Heart of God. But it does mean that it’s not so easy to love them like this. And we may have to go through a purification before arriving there. This purification will in a certain way separate us from them.

If that’s the case, wouldn’t you have to live for years in the desert to be able to be a real Little Brother? Well, yes, maybe! We will no doubt say that Father de Foucauld did it. That was the way he came to this point of detachment from self to reach attachment to others through God. This remains profoundly true. In any case, we too must commit ourselves to this path of detachment from everything that is not God, because if we were to soften this requirement, we would not be able to become a true Little Brother of Jesus.

Still, I cannot put out of my mind this requirement for presence among people, this caring for people in the sight of Christ, this sharing of the conditions of life which plunge us once again up to our necks in the most materializing worries and concerns of life, the daily life of laypeople.

This too is our path. I believe that it is exactly through finding our lives dependent on the gift of ourselves to others, made truly effective and not held back, that through our weakness, poor Little Brothers that we are, we will learn to remain faithful. It is in this presence among and to others, and through its demands, that this self-understanding must take place.

Of course, we do need the desert, that’s true—but not all the time. We are not monks, nor hermits, although we must have the essential disposition of radical detachment from all creation. We are not hermits, and I even think that we cannot

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Sahara, but it has no bearing on their second, final stage as contemplatives among people, friends, and workers.

achieve or maintain total generosity, especially at the time of Jesus' second call, if we have not given our lives to other people to save them.

Yes, we are vowed to take on our shoulders the burden of others, with all the heaviness that this represents, and even perceptible weight from time to time. Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus also offered her life for other people. She didn't hesitate to translate this decision into concrete terms, but for her, in her convent, these other people still resided far away. She was reduced to looking in the newspaper for the story of the last moments of the death-row inmate she had spiritually adopted. For us, things are different. Those we adopt will be so close, so heavy, on certain days, with all their human weight, that it may be necessary to make a great effort of faith to rediscover the supernatural sense of our care for souls.

But this burden of souls is essential for us. We cannot avoid it without ruining our vocation. It is an essential part of who we are. This is what I wanted to tell you today. It seems to me that this heavy burden is also a consequence of the truly priestly<sup>13</sup> aspect of our mission, inscribed in Christian grace as a fruit of the sacrifice of the Cross.

We are not made to go through this world alone, without the enlarging of our hearts that is the consequence of a great love. Love is the only force capable of pulling us out of ourselves—sometimes in spite of ourselves, to be sure—by linking us to other people. There is a depth of selflessness that we can only reach when we go there so as to nourish other beings with our own very substance.

Contemplation of God does not separate us from our fellow human beings. But it must carry out its work of detachment and illumination not only without destroying the requirements of our earthly destiny, but even by using them. Especially during this second call that Jesus addresses to us, at the time of the

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<sup>13</sup> Pope Francis will be recommending this as both the sacramental priesthood and the priesthood of Baptism common to all Christians, but in the original context, the focus will have been primarily, perhaps only, on the former. Few Little Brothers of Jesus are ordained priests. The reason for doing so, when it happens, is that their fellow Brothers may have access to the sacraments. If a Fraternity is within reach of an existing parish structure, this may not even be necessary.

maturity of our life, we must live for an effective, very real gift to other people. It is through this gift that our contemplative life will be purified.

We are not capable of leading some angelic and solitary life. That would be all the more dangerous for us, since we certainly have a completely inaccurate idea of the life of the angels and of the vision of the mystery of love which animates this life shared by the saints!

We have within us a vital need to love and, as it were, a necessity, to break the constriction of our self, to offer an effective gift, the fruit of a great love. The most authentic grace of contemplation does not go against these essential needs of our human life. Rather, it transforms and purifies the manifestations of these needs and, as far as we are concerned, it will even use, as an instrument, this influence that the people we love, to whom we belong, have over us, with this servitude, this tearing away from ourselves which is the consequence.

Grace will use, to elevate us above ourselves, this need for love which, left to its natural inclination, nevertheless leads so many people far from God. When things go right, when contemplation is genuine—on the contrary, this need for love, relationship, and friendship becomes, in the light and strength of God, an instrument of divine charity.

This is how there arises reconciliation between contemplation of the mystery of the love that is in God, on the one hand, and the gift of ourselves to our fellow human beings, who will not leave us in peace, on the other. Far from contradicting each other, these two dimensions are reconciled in the unique charity which makes the Heart of Christ beat. Consumed in charity, the Christian thus becomes spiritually, with Jesus, a shepherd of people, to lead them to the pastures of life.

The first call of Jesus separated us from the things we possess—from a job, from a human future, from a family, from a house. In a word, the first call separated us from the world. The Gospel parallel here is Jesus suddenly tearing Peter, James, and John from their boat, their fishing gear, their family, and their companions; or, Jesus snatching Matthew from his tax booth and his friends at that final feast. At such an initial moment, there was the exhilarating novelty of the first discovery of Jesus, a sincere desire to love him. Such excitement was born from a movement of

spontaneous sympathy for him. It arose together with progressive formation of the very selves of the disciples through the Lord's teaching, the experience of a kingdom of God different from what they had imagined, and finally, the ordeal of the Passion, with all its consequences—discouragement, fear, flight from the bloody and naked cross and perhaps even, like Peter, the triple denial.

It was then that the second call of Jesus resounded. Standing on the shore of the lake while the disciples were immersed again in the activities of yesteryear, they heard it. This call is from a Christ who is already no longer completely of the earth. He has been raised to new life. The voice he offers will tear away the apostles, this time, not only from things and activities, but from themselves. The way it will happen is by delivering them to other people because of love and so that they can bear witness to the evidence before them. Their condition will be like the fish holding the fisherman in slavery to toil day and night. "Simon, son of John, do you love me...? *Feed my sheep*" (Jn, 21:1–19).

It is like this for each of us. This second call of Jesus tears us from ourselves, this time for good, and without illusion, to deliver ourselves to souls because our vocation associates us by a contemplative grace and in a hidden way with the priestly and pastoral mission of the Church.

If we do not establish in our life a true centre of gift and love, in human form, following what Jesus tells us, I do not think that we can persevere in generosity. This centre is entirely in God, of course, but it also radiates in a visible form to those who, from all eternity, have been destined to await the gift of God through our own fidelity to love.

Have we agreed to form this bond which binds us and chains us to the one Pastor and the Sovereign Priest? Have we accepted its purifying demands? This is not a question of some youthful enthusiasm veiling true renunciation from us, or of an alibi excusing us for being for Christ alone. On the contrary, it is the supreme means employed by Jesus to bind us to his Cross by binding us to others, to tear us away from the illusions and the boredom of falling back on ourselves, by invading our heart and shaking up our life with concern for those whom we have adopted and who have a right over us like a child has a right over its mother and father.



Our life cannot be attached to anything; we should have, like Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus, like Brother Charles, the soul of a pastor, of a priest, of a missionary,<sup>14</sup> of a father, of a mother, eager for a ministry which finds place for the exercise of prayer, suffering, the gift of friendship, and fidelity to those we love. Definitively and throughout our old age we will remain linked, in joy or in sorrow, to these perhaps unknown brothers and sisters. Our vocation as Little Brothers could not find its balance without this gift.

Those of you who have not yet done so cannot cross this second threshold of life, until you have truly heard the second call of Jesus on the shore. Are you ready, forever, to live, pray, suffer, and die for Jesus, like him, and with him, for those he has given you to love? Did you find them?

We are made such that we cannot carry a concern, nor share a love, in an abstract and general way. It is not within our reach. It is only in the concrete and particular that we can love. We have an example of this. Think about the way the life of Brother Charles played out. He lived, offered his work, the substance of his life, and his death, for the Tuareg. It was the fullness of his life, but it was the last of his many careers. It was the response to the second call undoubtedly received in Beni-Abbès. From the moment of his conversion until the time he spent at Beni-Abbès, Brother Charles strove to live the demands of Jesus' first call.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> This is an allusion to two passages. The first to Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, Manuscript B, Letter to Sister Marie of the Sacred Heart (September 8, 1896), in *Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux* trans. John Clarke (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1976), 192–196, where the young saint speaks of the excellent way of being love in the heart of the Church, so as to be all of and each of prophet, doctor, missionary, and martyr. The second allusion is to Saint Charles de Foucauld, who in an analogous sense, but one more concretely immersed in the lives of others, sought to be brother to all (cf. Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* 286–287).

<sup>15</sup> The life of Charles de Foucauld is complex. It can be summarized as follows. He had a conversion at age 28 (1886). Thereafter, he journeyed to the Holy Land and was quite struck by the experience. He knew from the moment of his conversion that he could live only for God (see Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate* 155). He chose the life of a Trappist monk. After seven years (1890–1897), he gave this up. It didn't really satisfy him. The way he worded things himself at the time came down to a private judgment that his life wasn't austere enough, but he seems to have been touched also by the kind of poverty and fraternity lived by poor people outside his monastery in Syria. Drawn to his ideal of "Nazareth," he went to live in Nazareth itself, serving the Poor Clares there. Then, after becoming ordained a priest (1901), he ended up in the Sahara again, where he had been on military duty and as an explorer before his conversion. This is the

I do not know if it is possible for Brothers, except in exceptional cases and for special vocations, to live without making their gift effective. I do not know if they can live without referring it to a particular group of people to love—even as Jesus loved all men, and with him. Could it ever be?

This second call is normally heard at the age when a person's life is usually weighed down by the worries of others, the responsibility of professional tasks, and the education of children. That is in general. The analogous case is true for us.

I know the risks of making this gift of love concrete. It wouldn't be right to deny them. However, these risks are less than would be the risks of a life devoid of immediate reasons for donation of self. The reason here is that it is not a question of accepting the slightest reduction in the demands of a contemplative ideal, but of living it in a new way, in accordance with our vocation.

Following the call of the Lord, the peoples far from Christ, the working masses drawn towards materialism, or other people still (the nomads, the prisoners, the mine workers, the Pygmies, or the sailors) will constitute this flock that the Lord entrusts to us. It is this flock that will take you and keep you. This flock will also perhaps be the Little Brothers themselves, for those of you who have to bear some group responsibility or work in the service of the Fraternities.<sup>16</sup>

These are the people whom you are charged to seek and love, who will help you to exhaust your life in pure loss of yourself, as the Tuareg did for Father de Foucauld,

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location of Beni-Abbès, a small outpost. He made himself available to all, colonists and locals, but from within a cloistered existence there. Finally, he lived among the Tuareg deep in the Hoggar. This process started within five years of arriving at Beni-Abbès and only ended with his death in 1916. Even in the Hoggar, he grew and changed. He learned an important lesson when they saved his life during an illness which was probably scurvy. He finally learned that he not only takes Jesus to people, but he receives Christ from others as well, no matter how far they may appear from his Church. The theme of “who evangelizes whom” is also one dear to Pope Francis (e.g., *Evangelii Gaudium* 198).

<sup>16</sup> In other words, Pope Francis is saying, the “flock” is both your parishioners, priests of Rome, wherever you may find them and from whatever origins and walks of life they make their way to you, but the “flock” is also your fellow priests.

and as all the people to be saved were for Jesus the supreme reason to persevere until death in hours of agony.

In times of doubt, boredom, or discouragement, get down on your knees and ask yourself what you have done for those in your flock and if you have the right to be a bad pastor. You might have to ask yourself: Do you even have a flock at all? Do you have any concern, this desire to belong to others, body and soul? Have you adopted them like Jesus and with him, to the point of being capable of living and dying for them?

*Rome, Holy Thursday, April 18, 1957*

Hardly a day has passed that has not brought me a response from one of you to my letter from Saint-Gildas. When I wrote that letter, I was really thinking of addressing everyone in a truly intimate and fraternal dialogue.

It's true, we must get back to following Jesus, because, with our own weight, we deviate from the path followed by him this Thursday evening, a path which went from the upper room to Calvary. Without fidelity to the Eucharist, without daily renewing the effort of faith in the mystery of the presence of Jesus, without the renewal of life and supernatural perspectives which takes place in us—without all this fidelity, after our journey with Jesus has gone on for a long time, we would lose our way. We would not be able to follow him very far or even find the entrance to the path that he took to go towards that place where the salvation of the human race was to be effected: in death and the night of the ninth hour.

We won't know, we won't be able to. When we feel disoriented like this, let us surrender our weakness and our too-ineffective good will to Jesus in the Eucharist. Let that surrender occur at length, in a deep desire that he himself keeps us in his love.

A remark from one of you has suggested to me one last clarification.

In my letter from Saint-Gildas, I spoke to you of the illusion that could creep into the desire to lead, alone, a life apparently more completely in conformity with the counsels of the Gospel than that imposed on us by a religious community. I think in fact that there can be an illusion of this kind, during the first stage, as a result of an overly imaginative and insufficiently stripped-down conception, insufficiently subordinated to love, of a materially poor life. That's true. At the same time, I think that an authentic call for a more complete burial can be addressed to certain brothers, even if this burial requires a certain independence from the life of a Fraternity to be achieved. This eventuality is in fact provided for in the Constitutions, but it is more than this; it would have to be a requirement, unavoidable, of extreme love. This would have to be a love that had reached the end of its despoilment, than a requirement of or seeking of material poverty of life. Such solitary burial is an end, not a beginning. It is contained in the second call of Jesus, not in the first, and it will just as easily lead a Little Brother towards the desert, for burial in intercessory prayer, as in the middle of the crowd of the poor, for the sake of burial in the mystery of the cross which saves. Both of these eventualities remain in line with the same vocation which fully associates us with the life and intimate activity of Jesus the Saviour.

I will live these holy days, in union with all, in supplication, in order to obtain for each of you to gain some of the grace to persevere to the end in your total gift to Jesus in the Eucharist.