

Love your neighbor as yourself

Jesus



I want to accustom all the inhabitants ...to look on me as their brother

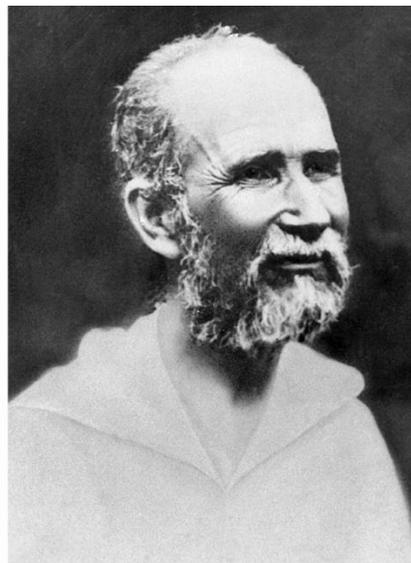
*Bl. Charles de Foucauld*

December 2021

Dear Friends in Jesus Christ,

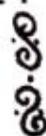
Merry Christmas! I pray you are all well. Especially after another year of turmoil, this liturgical season can offer a chance to step outside of the normal worries and pace of life. Hopefully, we have an opportunity to rest and recall those truths that day-to-day life can hasten past. Whether you are at home or visiting, I invite you to try and make some space and time to quietly meditate on the gift that is the Christmas season and all that it brings with it. From the unfathomable descent of God's incarnation flow the mysteries of redemption and the recapitulation of all creation to Christ, bringing all things under His headship. I wrote a brief meditation at the end of this newsletter that might assist you in pondering these things; it is based on an ancient Christian sarcophagus in Rome from the 300s.

If you haven't heard the news, Blessed Charles de Foucauld will become St. Charles de Foucauld on May 15, 2022! I won't be able to travel to Rome for the canonization, but thankfully technology makes it simple to see such things from a distance. His example and apostolic model have been a primary inspiration in my own vocation, and I am sure that his prayers have helped me persevere in it. Blessed Charles de Foucauld, pray for us!



Please send all correspondence to:

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Prayers are needed and appreciated!  
(no postal fee required)

Though I won't make the canonization, I am planning a pilgrimage in September of 2022. Another favorite saint of mine is St. Thomas Becket. His shrine in Canterbury, destroyed by King Henry VIII, was one of the top 3 pilgrimage destinations after his martyrdom in 1170. My hope (please pray that it can happen in spite of the pandemic) is to walk the pilgrimage route from London to Canterbury. This path would have been the one St. Thomas walked when he had to travel between the cities, and it is the same route that inspired Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. From Canterbury, I will walk to Dover and then take the ferry to Calais, France. My reason for doing this is to get the first stage of the Via Francigena completed. This is the granddaddy of the medieval pilgrimage routes, running from Canterbury to Rome (and even on to the Holy Land). I hope to complete this route over the coming decades in stages, God willing. As always, before I leave in September I will take any prayer intentions you have along with me, praying for you all on the way, leaving your prayers with St. Thomas Becket.

I wish all of you a peaceful, blessed Christmas! May the joy of the Holy Family be yours!

Matthew





*Detail from Sarcophagus of Marcus Claudianus, ~330-350 A.D, Rome*

The image above is one of the earliest representations of the Birth of Christ, and is situated in the top-left corner of the front face of an ancient Roman sarcophagus (a photo of the front is at the end of this meditation). It depicts Christ swaddled in a manger with the ox and ass in the background. He is gazing at a shepherd leaning on a staff. A tree stands behind the shepherd.

It is interesting that this scene is on a sarcophagus, something that is associated with death. The swaddled infant calls to mind the wrapped body inside the tomb, and prefigures Christ's own death. And yet, Christ's eyes are open and alive. One could say His face is depicted as that of a man, which is an artistic device to imply that, though a newborn, He is full of divine Wisdom.

The ox and ass recall the prophet Isaiah, who wrote hundreds of years earlier, "The ox knows its own, and the donkey its master's crib, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand." Jesus has been born to redeem not only Israel, but all mankind, yet He is not known in his infancy except to a

few humble animals who are drawn to stand above him in rapt attention. So-called “dumb” creatures recognize Who lies before them, and in their own way they give Him homage. An apocryphal gospel of Pseudo-Matthew relates, “On the third day of the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, the blessed virgin came out of the cave, went into the stable, and laid her boy, whom the ox and the ass worshipped, in a manger. Even the animals, ox and ass, among whom he lay, worshipped him unceasingly.” They recognize in some way that the Child is here to draw all creation from the misery and brokenness of the effects of sin.

And what of humanity, who has been undeservedly gifted with the ability and freedom to acknowledge and love their Creator and be drawn by Him to eternal life? With no room at an inn, God is born into poverty, where the humble are given the first opportunity to adore. And here we are invited to contemplate what is occurring between the Child and the shepherd.

Christ is looking directly at the shepherd. Though the ox and the ass are His, it is the shepherd that is capable of returning His gaze. For his part, the shepherd is leaning on his staff with feet crossed, one hand supporting his head, a posture of one who is safe, at peace, and in no hurry to leave. For he has encountered the gaze of God and has every intention of staying as long as he can. His flocks can wait; his other tasks can wait. For now, adoration is his response. In this Child he recognizes the true Shepherd who, though now so very small and vulnerable, will rescue man from the wolves of sin and death and shepherd His people rightly. The Infant peers deep within the shepherd and sees everything, but the shepherd is not troubled or ashamed by this searching glance, for his faith is profound.

This Christmas, may we spend time seeking and meeting that gaze of Jesus, who looks at us as intently and entirely as He looks at the shepherd. Though all is seen by Christ in this look, it is one that can heal, forgive, and illuminate. Let us in all humility and confidence stand before Him with the faith of the shepherd, returning love for Love.

