

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday Easter (C)

15<sup>th</sup> May 2022

‘Titus Brandsma & Charles de Foucauld — vocation to sainthood’

Acts 14: *all that God had done with them* Apoc 21: *a new heaven and a new earth*  
Jn 13: 31–35: *by this love for one another everyone will know you are my disciples*

Last Sunday we kept ‘Good Shepherd Sunday’ / ‘Vocations Sunday’ as we always do on the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter. This Sunday I would like to continue that same theme, and to elaborate on it and for a very particular reason. The principal vocation of every Christian is the *call to holiness*; in other words the vocation to be a *saint*. And today (this morning) in Rome the Church places before us for our honouring them, 10 new saints! — one layman, a martyr; 5 priests, one a martyr; and 4 religious sisters, foundresses of their orders; and in such a range of cultural and personal settings, from Tamil Nadu in 18<sup>th</sup>-c. India, to Tamanrassat in 1<sup>st</sup>-world-war Algeria, to Dachau concentration camp in second-world-war Germany. Within that general call to holiness, they each found their specific personal vocation — in fact, it must be true to say that, in order to have found their way to sainthood, they must have sought the very path that would please God, the personal vocation He called them to. To study the lives of the saints, whether from antiquity, or from nearer our own day, is to fill us with that much-needed conviction that he does have a

plan for us, just as He had a plan for them, and led them by straight paths, or more circuitous ones, to the triumph of final sanctity. In each of their lives they were led by the call of God to live out that command of Christ in the Gospel: “*love one another ... By this love you have for one another, everyone will know that you are My disciples.*”

I would like to tell you something more about two of these 10 saints, to illustrate the power of Christ’s message at work in them — one whose life was very much committed to the Lord from an early age (the Dutch Carmelite friar Titus Brandsma); and one whose early life was far from religious (the French Trappist-turned-hermit Charles de Foucauld). But I don’t want these comments to be some mere biographical lecture, but to offer us a real entering in to the life of the Spirit, sensing the active vocation that the Lord made to them ... and makes to us.

**Titus Brandsma**, born in Holland at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> c. to a devout Catholic family: 5 of the 6 children lived their lives as professed religious!). He entered the Carmelite friars at 17 years of age, and after solemn profession was ordained at 24. He was a man to whom we

can easily relate as university students — his *forte* was academic study, writing, lecturing, especially in philosophy and mysticism; he devoted himself to Catholic journalism, and helped found the new Catholic University of Nijmegen. But the great clash came with the rise of Nazism in the late 1930s, which he resisted strongly. He refused to allow his Catholic journals to publish any pro-Nazi adverts or propaganda, and urged others, both Catholics and others working in the press to resist these pressures also. When Holland was overrun by the Nazis in 1940, he was of course an immediate target, but he continued to speak out boldly, encouraging the Dutch bishops to condemn the persecution of Jews and other gross violations of human rights by the occupiers. By 1942 he had been taken into custody, and after incarceration in concentration camps in Holland was then transferred to Dachau, where from June to July he was subjected to biological experimentation, and finally killed by lethal injection on 26<sup>th</sup> July. He prayed for the nurse who injected him, and left her his rosary beads — some

years later she came back to the faith and was able to give testimony as to his sanctity and holy actions at the end of his 61 yrs of life and 44 yrs of Carmelite life. His life and ministry of witness led to a strong denunciation of the deportation of Jews by the Dutch bishops, even though this led to an even harsher treatment of Dutch Catholics by the Nazi occupiers.

A learned and bookish man, an academic and a writer, Titus Brandsma had a ‘calling within a calling’ — little might he ever have imagined, when he joined the Carmelites at 17, the supreme sacrifice he would be called on to make, in faithfulness to the Gospel of Jesus’s outspoken care for our every neighbour in need. Seeking to do God’s will from his teenage years meant that, when evil encroached, he was in place, ready and waiting to be called by God to new levels of courage and sanctity. Perhaps that’s the key lesson from Titus Brandsma, to devote ourselves to hearing God’s call from our earliest age. It’s not strange to be called clearly by God into ministry as a child or teenager. If we dedicate ourselves

even now — as students, as young people — to nurturing holiness, and to seeking to hear and do God's will *now*, not putting it off, then God can make something great of us in His sight, a saint who will lead many to God, ... a martyr of sorts, who sacrifice participation in anything of the immoral temptations of secular life, in order to be at the disposition of the Spirit, to do whatever good He has planned for you, ... *now*!

The 2<sup>nd</sup> of the new saints raised to the altars this morning that I want to speak about had a life really quite different to that of St Titus Brandsma. He is **St Charles de Foucauld**, who lived about 25 yrs earlier than Titus Brandsma. His early life was far from settled, though born a French viscount, and rather quickly far from religious. Orphaned young, and abandoning Catholic practice at secondary school, he then entering a military academy: he had plenty of inherited money, but few morals, and his life could well be described as one of debauchery in those first years as a soldier. But being assigned to North Africa as a soldier began a recovery of his life, as he started to be

fascinated by the seriousness with which the Algerians lived out their Islamic practice. In due course he resigned from the army, left the barracks, and began a 6-yr period of journeying — Morocco, the Sahara, Palestine — which he recorded in great detail, and was honoured as a geographer. But this new existence of his as a traveller had begun a great process of personal exploration, and soon afterwards he entered the severe Trappist order — Cistercians of the Strict Observance — in France and later on the Turkish-Syrian border, but even this rigorous lifestyle no longer was sufficient for the calling to asceticism that he was experiencing. He transferred to living in some poverty in Nazareth, and then in due course after seeking ordination at the age of 43 he found his true home back in the Algerian outback, near Tamanrasset, on a bare plateau at almost 3000m altitude. With his bare hands he constructed a hermitage, began to get to know the local Moslem population, mastered their Touareg language and culture and wrote up a grammar and French–Touareg dictionary. His life as a hermit was severe, based on long hours of

Eucharistic adoration, and very solitary. Few would ever have known of ‘Charles of Jesus’ as he styled himself, far away from civilization, living his radical poverty and life of prayer. He called his fraternity the ‘little brothers of Jesus,’ although at the time of his death in 1916 — a tragic victim of insurrections connected with World War I — in fact he had no followers as such. But in the century since his death, his spirituality of solitude and prayer has drawn many after him — both men and women — to consecrate themselves to the Lord as ‘little brothers of Jesus,’ ... ‘little sisters of Jesus,’ and other such congregations.

What does such a life offer us, as we reflect on his vocation, and ours — a life so different to Titus Brandsma’s, a life that seemed to lack direction for so long, and lack God? I think it reassures us that God’s call is insistent, never withdrawn, never absent. Even if we try to drown out the call of God to the right path for our life, as Charles de Foucauld did in his young adult life, yet the Lord has ways ... In the most unexpected of places, like the bare Sahara for Charles, the Lord can gradually call us

back to Him, to remind us that there is a serious business to life, a great and glorious duty to serve God. From that dissolute playboy of a soldier, to the most ascetic of hermits on the barest of Algerian mountaintops, Charles’s life and vocation steadies us when we may doubt we know, or have, a vocation from God. We *do*, and God will reveal it, if we pray devotedly for that quiet revelation of His will. In the famous ‘Prayer of Abandonment’ of St Charles de Foucauld, he imagines Jesus dying on the cross and places these words on Jesus’s lips. He introduces the meditation saying, “It is the last prayer of our Master, of our Beloved ... may it be ours ... May it not only be the prayer of our last moment, but that of all our moments ...”

Father, I abandon myself into Your hands.  
Do with me what You will.  
Whatever you may do, I thank You; I am ready for all, I accept all.  
Let only Your Will be done in me, and in all Your creatures.  
I wish no more than this, O Lord.  
Into Your hands I commend my soul.  
I offer it to You with all the love of my heart,  
for I love You, Lord, and so need to give myself  
to surrender myself into Your hands  
without reserve and with boundless confidence.  
For You are my Father. Amen.