



Henri Caffarel, prophète pour notre temps
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HENRI CAFFAREL AND THE SPIRITUAL ACCOMPANIMENT OF WIDOWHOOD

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I feel very honoured to be speaking at this Colloquium. I am happy to talk about widowhood, because I have been a widow since the age of twenty-nine and I am the mother of three children. My remarks will interest the widows who belong to the Fraternité Notre-Dame de la Résurrection (Fraternity of Our Lady of the Resurrection) movement, who will discover the spiritual accompaniment that the founding members received and will also interest Christians who will discover the history of widowhood in the Church of Christ and its spiritual wealth.

1.The Beginnings of the Fraternité Notre-Dame de la Résurrection under the direction of Father Henri Caffarel

In 1943 at Lourdes, Father Henri Caffarel, already the founder of a movement for conjugal spirituality, preached a retreat to about thirty young war widows, who had asked him in the preceding years to help them on the path of widowhood, just as he had helped them on the path of marriage. Seven of them, without conferring with each other, felt called to give their life totally to God, and yet to remain in the world and maintain their family and professional life. They were convinced that one day they would find their “partner for eternity” again. Father Caffarel gathered together these seven widows, who each independently had confided this call to him.

Listen to Marie-Françoise de Boucheman, one of the founders of the Fraternité Notre-Dame de la Résurrection in November 1996, *“We will never be grateful enough to Father Caffarel for having immediately sensed that this subject matter came from God. Had he not gathered us together then, had he not committed himself with us in this adventure that neither he nor we knew where it would lead, undoubtedly the Fraternité Notre-Dame de la Résurrection would never have seen the light of day. Just like Abraham, we went out even though we did not know where we were going.” (Heb 11:8; Gn 12:1).*

These young widows understood that their married love had not been destroyed, because love is stronger than death and so their husbands were living in Jesus Christ. Together with Father Caffarel in that month of September 1943, they came to the Grotto of Massabielle asking the Virgin Mary to enlighten them on this unknown path, in order to do the Lord’s will, to live and deepen the glimpsed desire, because Mary too had known the state of widowhood and her whole life had been a permanent “yes” to God’s will.

Let us listen to Marie-Françoise again, *“You know that Father Caffarel really knows how to preach a retreat. The atmosphere was very intense and very prayerful; it was really quite extraordinary. He gave a masterful synthesis of all the exchanges that had taken place over the previous year in our circles. All the widows were amazed, dazzled, filled with enthusiasm. We had the impression of being put back on our feet. After the helplessness, the torture of widowhood, our lives seemed to make sense again. Very soon the idea of praying for couples appeared. Our widowhood made us discover that the sacrament of marriage opened up perspectives much more extensive than those discovered during our husband’s lifetime. Eschatological perspectives that led us to pray for couples that were just beginning on that path.”*

Over the months and years to come, these widows’ conviction brought them with the help of Father Caffarel, who discovered it himself by listening to them, to seek the solid doctrinal foundation of their way



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of understanding consecrated widowhood. Father Caffarel referred with them to what the Bible said. He meditated with them on the biblical notion of the human couple, such as was made evident in the first pages of Genesis. God created man and woman. Equal, because they possessed the same human nature, *“This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh”* (Gn 2:23) and under the gaze of God, *“So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”* (Mt 19:6).

Let us listen to Marie-Françoise de Boucheman once more, *“Father Caffarel did not invent anything. He asked questions and listened in order to enable us to realise the intuitions that were buried deep within us and he taught us based on our intuitions. We were seeking a doctrine, a spirituality for widowhood, and the ways and means for a life of prayer: What did the Church Fathers say about widowhood? What is consecrated widowhood and what does it signify and mean in the Church? How to go about living the life of a consecrated widow and yet be fully in the world? Thus, for years, we asked ourselves all these questions that became future subjects for formation and training and father added the concern for doctrinal formation to them. Life and research were inextricably linked and went hand in hand.”*

The widows used biblical texts to progress in their thinking on widowhood, as well as those of the Church Fathers (St Ambrose, St John Chrysostom, St Augustine...) that they also questioned. And these women, who had been prematurely widowed, decided to commit, in communion with their husbands who were already with God, not to remarry, to keep the vow of chastity. They offer up their sacrifice to God for the salvation of couples, for the happiness of couples and the holiness of families.

2. Spiritual Wealth in the State of Widowhood

Father Caffarel wrote in the *Offertoire* (Offertory) magazine in January, 1947, *“As long as widows remain completely offered up to the Lord, nothing will be able to separate them from the person who, admittedly invisible, is alive, forever loving, and united to the One who is Love itself.”*

Cardinal Suhard, Archbishop of Paris, expressed the distinctive character of this vocation in 1948. *“The unique nature, that seems to me to justify the creation of a new community, is the married character of your vocation, this mystery of widowhood that you desire so much to embrace, this love stronger than death that guides you, this offering of your sacrifice for couples... All that seems to me to merit the benevolent attention of the Church. Certainly, it is not fortuitous that you are guided by Father Caffarel, to whom was entrusted the apostolate of couples in our diocese.”* (Charter of the Fraternité Notre-Dame de la Résurrection, p. 9).

“The mystery of marriage, the mystery of widowhood” belong to the same continuity. Pope Pius XII confirmed the spiritual wealth of widowhood in his speech of September 16th, 1957, given in French, during the International Family Days in Rome, organised by the International Union of Family Organisations, *“The Church is delighted to see the spiritual riches specific to this state of widowhood being cultivated. The first richness of all, it seems to us, is the lively conviction that, far from destroying the links of human and supernatural love contracted in marriage, death can enhance and reinforce them. Undoubtedly, the matrimonial institution no longer exists, but married love which made up its soul, which gave it vigour and beauty, with all its splendour and its vows of eternity, remains as do the spiritual and free beings who gave themselves to each other.”*

The Pope continued, *“If the sacrament of marriage, symbol of the redemptive love of Christ for his Church, already applies the reality of his love to the husband and wife, then widowhood becomes in some way the result of this mutual consecration; it represents the current life of the Church, deprived of her celestial Husband, with whom however she remains unfailingly united, walking towards Him in faith and hope, living*



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and experiencing this love that supports her and impatiently awaiting the fulfilment of the initial promises.”
The Pope thus showed the positive meaning of the widow’s fidelity to her husband.

The Pope continued, *“The widow will dedicate herself to her educational task (...) to ensure that her children get a virile, solid formation, that is open to society, in order to give them the freedom to which they are entitled, in particular in the choice of a state of life. (...) She will remain united in spirit to her husband, who will suggest to her in God the attitude to have, will give her authority and foresight.”*

This conception of widowhood proposed by the Pope is for every Christian widow, but some widows consider it to be a personal calling. The small group of widows at Lourdes with even more joy and recognition welcomed this message because in it, they found the answer to their search and their questions that had been submitted to the Pope. They had sent him a file containing documents, articles, their testimonies and letters. Of course, Father Caffarel had played a large role in the putting together of this file.

The Fraternité’s Charter says, *“Such is the grandeur of widowhood when it is experienced as the extension of the graces of marriage and the preparation of their fulfilment in God.”* (p. 13) Love leads to God. Consecrated widowhood is therefore a sign, a testimonial, of love that is stronger than death, with the perspective of living in God, in communion with one’s spouse.

With Father Caffarel’s help, the widows understood that death did not break the bonds of love. By accepting the cross, the separation, by relinquishing the spouse’s presence, the widow welcomes and accepts another more intimate, stronger and deeper presence. The first widows understood their vocation as a Church vocation, that is the Church as awaiting Christ’s return in Glory, as a call to become holy through and in widowhood. At the same time, they discovered their mission, as a mission alongside widows, as well as with couples. Through their fidelity to Christ’s calling, they mean to bear witness to the grandeur of the marriage sacrament.

3. A Church Vocation that still has its place today

Today in 2017, how do I personally experience this presence of God and the absence/presence of my spouse? Becoming a widow at the age of 29 is terrible. You have just begun to build a life together and alas! Being a widow means being empty without the spouse. With Collins’ departure, I felt a deficit, an absence, a dispossession and the difficulties began. A part of me left with Collins. Within my suffering, Christ was present. I wanted to meet other young widows who were in my situation and to be able to express my pain and feelings. I discovered the Fraternité Notre-Dame de la Résurrection. After several years of training and discernment, I committed to chastity for the Lord forever, relying on the spiritual help of the other widows in this Fraternité. Thus, I found women who had received the same calling as I had to live with Christ, to bear witness to faith in the Resurrection, to love being stronger than death. Today, I have been put back on my feet. The Fraternité helped me to give myself totally to God. As a mother to three children, I continue to look after them, Collins gives me the help I need and God in his grace takes care of me forever. It is not an easy road, but I am not alone, *“The Lord is my Shepherd, there is nothing I shall want.”* (Ps 22:1)

My own testimonial clearly highlights the importance for today of what Father Caffarel and the first widows of the Fraternity of Our Lady of the Resurrection discovered: the grandeur of widowhood experienced as the extension of the graces of marriage, a sign, for the Church, of the expectation of Christ’s return in Glory (Pius XII). The Fraternité Notre-Dame de la Résurrection, Espérance et Vie, a Christian movement for the early years of widowhood and an accompaniment of widowers and widows,



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was born in France and emerged from this quest. It is a message that has meaning for today's world: the Fraternité Notre-Dame de la Résurrection is well established in Europe, in India, but also in four African countries: Burkina Faso, Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda and Cameroon. The Fraternité has developed a lot in each African country where it exists, and already includes about a hundred widows. The charism is experienced as deeply in Europe as in Africa in the diversity of cultures, and it is women who felt the call from God to consecrate their widowhood to Him. In Africa, they sometimes live in very difficult conditions; overnight their lives have collapsed, they find themselves traumatised and rejected by their in-laws who waste no time in chasing them from the married home, some are treated as slaves. Despite all this, they all trust in the Lord and are moved by the desire to accomplish God's will.

We remember the Sadducees' question to Jesus when they presented the case of a woman who had been married successively to seven brothers and they asked him whose wife she would be after the resurrection of the dead. Jesus' reply was, "*When the dead arise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven.*" (Mk 21:25). In a Preface for the Deceased, the liturgy proclaims, "*Life is not destroyed, it is transformed.*" According to an analogy that Father Caffarel used to like, just like a scaffolding becomes useless when the house is built, similarly marriage ends with death, but love is stronger than death and what counts is the resurrection.

Conclusion

God is present in marriage, God is present in widowhood; marriage, widowhood, God is faithful. In the crisis that marriage is encountering in many countries, consecrated widowhood is a treasure for the Church, a sign of God's fidelity beyond death. This fidelity is good news for widowers and widows, of course, but also for married couples. Father Caffarel was the prophet for this in the Church; a way of holiness is open to all, that leads to God beyond death. Father Caffarel put all his energy into the service of announcing this.

For consecrated widows in the following ways:

- he recognised a call of the Holy Spirit in the converging conversations that seven widows confided in him during the retreat in Lourdes in 1943;
- he offered support to the widows with his wise counsel, authenticated the call that they had received from the Lord and helped them recognise this vocation in the Church;
- he accompanied and guided Marie-Françoise de Boucheman, the main founder of the Fraternité Notre-Dame de la Résurrection and the team made up of the first widows, by listening attentively to them and explaining the spirituality of widowhood to them;
- he transmitted to the widows the firm requirement that all should have a spiritual formation, both at the beginning, but also subsequently, in particular the daily half-hour of private prayer and the topic of monthly meditation.

I will end by reciting for you the Fraternité's prayer for couples and families. It is called "I", "L", "O": *Intercession, Louange, Offrande* (Intercession, Praise, Offering). Couples and families can count on the consecrated widows' prayer:

"We bless you Lord; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. You are Great. You are Holy. You are Good. Receive the offering of our lives for the holiness of couples and families, so that the world may believe in Your love.



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Permit us to align our lives with Your will. Convinced of Your infinite love, we present our long-suffering brothers and sisters to you, calling on Your mercy for them. May they welcome and accept everything that Your tenderness gives them so that Your glory increases. Amen.”

Praise be to Jesus Christ, who sent his servant Father Henri Caffarel as a witness to his special love for widows.

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