



Henri Caffarel, prophète pour notre temps *Colloque International – 8 & 9 Décembre 2017*

CHRIST AT THE HEART OF THE COUPLE

Delphine & Antoine Quantin

Introduction

As you know, the Teams of Our Lady grew out of a meeting between Father Caffarel and a few couples who wished to discover how to experience fully their love for Christ within the sacrament of marriage. Their unique goal was simple and yet absolute: holiness. For more than 30 years, Father Caffarel accompanied the Movement in this quest and all the while progressively put into place a framework that enabled ever more people to experience a spirituality unique to Christian couples.

We belong to a generation of Team members who did not know Father Caffarel directly. Our first “contact” with him, if we can put it like that, was as fiancés to attend the thanksgiving mass presided over by Cardinal Lustiger at the Madeleine, Paris, a few days after his death. We were touched by Cardinal Lustiger’s homily where he spoke of Father Caffarel as a prophet of our times.

Our true meeting with Father Caffarel occurred a few years after our wedding, through our commitment to the Teams of Our Lady and the discovery and adhesion to the Movement’s Charter. A charter that we immediately found to be exciting, with its frank and direct style, that avoids all beating about the bush. This Charter was indeed demanding, but also very motivating for a young couple who had just got married and who wanted to give Christ the foremost place and to find happiness in the union.

In order to share the richness of Father Caffarel’s discoveries on the meaning of the Christian marriage, there is of course the Charter, the 70th anniversary of whose promulgation we are celebrating and upon which we will rely throughout our talk today. But we are equally lucky in being able to access a large number of articles and talks, in which Father Caffarel added precision and completed this rule and to re-read the Movement’s development.

So, if you will, let us reread the spirituality of the Teams of Our Lady in the light of Father Caffarel’s writings.

1. The Christian Couple called to holiness

When we speak of the Teams of Our Lady, we often speak of the Sit-Down or of married prayer that make up the “Endeavours,” or commitments undertaken by couples in the Movement. They are indeed its “trademark”, but it would be simplistic to begin talking about these practical aspects without firstly considering the issue of the sacrament of marriage.

In 1959, at the Rome gathering, Father Caffarel referring to the setting up of the Charter said, “*What attitude ought to be given to this Rule? More mystical, putting the accent on the evangelical ideal? More legal, exacting obligations? Undoubtedly, the two points of view needed to be combined.*”¹

“*The mystical attitude*” is also present in the Charter’s introduction:

¹ Henri CAFFAREL, « Vocation et itinéraire des Équipes Notre-Dame (Vocation and Journey of the Teams of Our Lady) », *L’Anneau d’Or*, n° 87-88, May-August 1959, p. 239-256.



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“They intend to fulfill their baptismal vows.

They are determined to live for Christ, with Christ, and in Christ.

They give themselves unconditionally to Him.

They agree to serve Him without hesitation.

They acknowledge Him as Lord and Master of their home.

They base their family life on His Gospel.

They want their love, sanctified by the sacrament of marriage, to give glory to God, to bear witness to men and women that Christ has redeemed love, and to atone for sins against the marriage bond.”

There indeed lies Father Caffarel’s intuition and that of those first couples who sought him out to help them journey, there lies the founding charism of the Movement. Even if it is not explicitly written in the Charter, the married couple is called to holiness, in and through the sacrament of marriage.

This is what Father Caffarel had to say during the same talk in Rome in 1959, *“Gradually the eminent place of marriage becomes clear in God’s great design. It appears to all of us as organised for the Lord’s glory. Its aims are indeed the multiplication of the sons and daughters of God, mutual aid between spouses in the pursuit of holiness.”*

But what is holiness? In an *L’Anneau d’Or* (The Golden Ring) article of 1963, Father Caffarel wrote, *“A saint is not firstly, as many imagine, a type of champion who accomplishes virtuous exploits and spiritual observations. For a start, it is a man beguiled by God. And one who gives up his whole life to God.”* (*L’Anneau d’Or*, n° 111-112, May-August, 1963). This definition reminds us of the account he gave of his own encounter with Christ in March 1923, *“At the age of twenty-three, Jesus Christ, in an instant, became Someone for me.”*

Thus, the vocation of a married couple is to enable each spouse to let themselves be beguiled by God in order to experience and live what Father Caffarel called *“the true marriage of the soul with its God.”* *“Spiritual growth precisely in and through marriage”* enables Christ to call each of the spouses to this total union with Him, according to their own personal progression. Indeed, for Father Caffarel, it did not necessarily mean a simultaneous progression of the spouses as he explained in the same 1963 article. *“Too many spouses do not understand this. With a touching and above all naïve good will, they claim to travel at the same rate on the spiritual road, avoiding disunity, loitering for one another. May each one respond courageously to the Lord’s calls! Approaching Him does not mean that they are in danger of moving away from their spouse.”* If this call bewilders or impedes human love, it is nevertheless a necessary stage for total union with Christ. A new love within the couple is thus born from this intimacy with Christ. Henceforth husband and wife love each other with the same love that Christ bears for them. Another citation from Father Caffarel, *“I love this spouse with Christ’s heart and it is indeed with married love that I love him.”* This new love has no other goal than to enable the spouse to also make a total gift of their life to Christ.

The relationship with Christ occurs particularly in the Eucharist. The couple who see it as an offering of their union participates in Christ’s sacrifice. Father Caffarel wrote, *“The Eucharist has a vital role to play to reinforce the union of those whom God united in marriage. Not only to sanctify each of the spouses, [...] but to tighten and sanctify the very link that unites them.”* (*L’Anneau d’Or*, n° 117-118, 1964). And again, *“The union between two beings, as you well know, is valued by what they share. Yet you who seek in the Eucharist the very life of Christ, it is that, this very life of Christ, which you firstly must share. And this life in you is joyful knowledge of the Father, a gush of filial love.”* (*ibidem*)



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For Father Caffarel, the call to a personal union of each of the spouses with Christ thanks to their spiritual growth within the couple is valid for all couples, those who live in harmony but also those who struggle. In all couples united by the sacrament of marriage, whether it is in the happy moments or in the sufferings, *“grace is at work there to bring each one to meet the living Christ.”* The sacrament of marriage is therefore much more than *“an aid from God to heal human love, enrich it, make it happier and more lasting.”* It is a covenant between Christ and the couple. If the human quality of marriage is not an aim in itself, but a means to enable each person to accomplish this journey towards holiness, nonetheless it must be carefully maintained so that its grace may spread because according to Father Caffarel, *“only a married life lived to the full enables the sacrament to produce its fruits.”*

Father Caffarel was tireless in his examination of the Christian meaning of marriage and the ideal to which each couple is called and this is what we have tried to reiterate in a few sentences. But he was also tireless in proposing a pedagogy to help couples to journey gradually, at their own tempo, toward this ideal, compatible with their state in life. The Charter is the translation of this.

2. The Endeavours: a Means in the Service of this Vocation

The Charter of Teams of Our Lady therefore proposes concrete means in order to fully experience and live out the sacrament of marriage. It was drafted when, a few years after the first meetings of the couples, Father Caffarel felt that there was a risk of the Movement being watered down, that the Movement was not going to be faithful to the ideal that we have just presented to you. This is what he said to the European Regional Responsible Couples in 1987 at Chantilly, *“It was then that I was driven to reflect, to put this question to myself: how is it that members of religious orders journey towards sanctity throughout their whole life without falling away, without becoming discouraged, without abandoning? It is because they have a rule. And this idea came into my mind; it stuck there and I spoke to others about it: “If we wish to avoid a collapse, or at least choosing the easy way, do we not need to have a rule?” And it is in 1945, 1946 and 1947 that we thought about the Charter.”*

Thus, the Charter gave a framework to all Team members. It defined a certain number of obligations, as we used to call them back then, the first of which were what we now call the Endeavours. Over the years, Father Caffarel was led, based on experience, to cause them to evolve slightly, more in the sense of reinforcing the demands, because as he used to say and as he used to practise, *“Be demanding, you will never disappoint.”* The Endeavours as we know them today were defined in a 1977 document that is complementary to the Charter and entitled *“What is a Team of Our Lady?”*

Here are the six Endeavours:

1. A regular reading (or hearing) of the Word of God.
2. A daily period set aside for true “conversation with the Lord” (prayer).
3. A daily time between husband and wife for conjugal and if possible, family prayer
4. A monthly in-depth talk between husband and wife in the Lord’s presence (the sit down).
5. A drawing up (and monthly revision) of one’s rule of life.
6. A yearly retreat (at least two days) made together as husband and wife, if possible, in order to withdraw into the presence of the Lord and carry out a spiritual review of the past year.

When we talk about the Endeavours, it is important to say that they are not an end in and of themselves. They are, of course, the means suggested by the Movement to enable each Team member and each couple



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to progress spiritually. As Father Caffarel said in Rome in 1959, *“Do I need to explain once more that the Charter is not an end, an absolute end in itself? If you can show me that any of the obligations or any of the methods is not a means of helping all the couples make progress in charity, then it will be immediately either withdrawn or corrected.”*²

There are two main pivots in these Endeavours: those that invite you to re-read and to convert and those that aim to reinforce a nearness to Christ. But both are closely linked in a single and unique goal, that of putting Christ at the centre of the couple’s life.

The Sit-Down is the first Endeavour instituted by Father Caffarel, in an *L’Anneau d’Or* editorial of 1945. It is also undoubtedly the single Endeavour that is the most well known amongst couples even outside the Movement. If it is often insisted on during Marriage preparation courses in France, it is unquestionably because it contains great human and spiritual wealth. The Sit-Down has its source in Christ’s words, *“For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it?”* (Lk 14:28) It involves husband and wife making an appointment once a month to see each other and take time out of their lives in order to let the Holy Spirit enlighten them about their life and to enable them to renew their relationship. Father Caffarel, as a discriminating observer of couples, understood the danger that routine and preoccupations represented for married couples. In 1945, if Father Caffarel had simply proposed time to talk together as a couple that would have been innovative enough, since communication within the couple is indispensable in order to be in unity of purpose. But the Sit-Down is not solely limited to an exchange of points of view, it has a supplementary spiritual dimension, because it takes place under the Lord’s steady gaze. It could be said that it is a three-way exchange, or in Father Caffarel’s words, *“a pilgrimage to the source”* of the couple’s love, in order to measure the road travelled and to confront daily reality against the ideal perceived during marriage preparation. Father Caffarel even talked of it as the family’s *“examination of conscience.”* With hindsight, we can only admire the pertinence of this proposition. It is a precious aid at all stages of married life, as much as in the early years of marriage when the couple learns to adjust to each other and to juggle their professional and family life, but also later on when routine and habit gain ground. Numerous couples can testify to the usefulness of the Sit-Down for maintaining dialogue or picking it up again during difficult periods or again for taking important decisions together.

-The choice of a Rule of Life that is proposed to the Team members is, in a certain way, the same exercise as the Sit-Down, but done individually. It consists of reviewing the past month in order to identify something in your life that needs converting so as to enable you to get closer to Christ. This Endeavour is directly related to monastic life, where the Rule guarantees the balance between the different activities and the relationships within the community. The choice of a Rule of Life, with or without the help of your spouse, sometimes after a discussion during a Sit-Down is, for Father Caffarel, also an incentive for spiritual accompaniment, since the Charter says that *“the counsel and control of a priest are desirable.”*

The annual retreat proposed by the Charter was also imagined by Father Caffarel as a time of prayer and reviewing of one’s life. Couples are invited for a length of time *“of at least 48 hours”* to distance themselves from their daily lives in order to foster dialogue with Christ and their spouse. Just like the topics studied for each Team meeting, the annual retreat was also thought of as a time of formation, so that each couple would be concerned with learning more about the riches of the Christian faith.

² Henri CAFFAREL, *ibid.*



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Another vital point in the Charter is married prayer and, if possible, family prayer. In a 1961 *L'Anneau d'Or* article,³ Father Caffarel noted that the sacrament of marriage consecrated the couple to Christ as a couple and not simply as two people. Through their prayer, but more generally through their whole life, the Christian couple, as all baptised people, give thanks to God. But, through their marriage, the couple enters a relationship with Christ that enables them to pray to the Father and to intercede for the world through and with Him. And this is how, through the sacrament of marriage, the Christian couple becomes a “*little domestic church*,” according to St John Chrysostom’s expression.

This is what Father Caffarel said, “*And at night, when that man and that woman pray at the foot of their bed, it is the prayer of the beloved Son that the Father in the heavens hears, because, in their heart, the Spirit of Christ inspires their feelings.*”

Married prayer therefore consists above all in letting the Holy Spirit resonate in each person’s heart with no other aim but to praise God. This is what can liberate numerous couples from the natural reluctance that they may have in opening up this so very intimate part of their soul even before their spouse.

In addition, even if it is not its primary aim, married prayer bears numerous fruits in the life of couples who pray together. “*It is one of the great factors of spiritual unity and even unity itself between the spouses.*” It stimulates each person’s spiritual growth, invites them to be missionary and to open themselves to others. It facilitates self-sacrifice and forgiveness when necessary. It stimulates personal spiritual life.

For Father Caffarel, “*if all Christian couples were convinced of the importance of married prayer; if in all those homes, married prayer was alive, there would be a prodigious growth of joy, love and grace in the world.*”

Family prayer lived as an extension of couple prayer is a source of great grace for this little domestic church that makes up the family. It is a sign of Christ’s presence within it and from there in the heart of the world. It reflects the coherence and unity of the spouses’ life by associating their children, gift from God and fruit of the love, to their prayer as a couple. Family prayer, like married prayer, bears beautiful fruit by contributing to family unity. It invites the children to develop their own spiritual life by getting them into the habit of putting God first in their life. It is, no doubt, more easily established in families when the children are small but takes on greater significance as they grow up, in continuity with Sunday Eucharist and the Sacraments. It is the link between family life and Church life.

In 1970, during an International Gathering in Rome and after Pope Paul VI’s speech to the Teams of Our Lady, Father Caffarel wished to add two new Endeavours: listening to the Word of God and private prayer.

Father Caffarel was convinced of the benefits of regular reading of the Word of God. This is what he said to justify this addition, “*We will then see the miracles that the Word of God brings about, because it is creative: it enables those who open themselves to its virtue to be enlivened, it makes joy spring forth in the home.*”

At that talk, he also asked each Team member to reserve at least ten minutes per day for private prayer, saying, “*where interior prayer is lacking, everything perishes; where there is prayer, everything is born again, everything is fruitful.*”

This double addition aimed at reinforcing the spouses’ intimacy with Christ, so that they could truly know Him in order to bear witness to God’s marvels in their life.

³ Henri CAFFAREL, « Le foyer chrétien », (The Christian Home, not translated), *L'Anneau d'Or*, n° 98, March-April 1961, p. 132-143.



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3. Team Life

Perhaps some of you are surprised that at this stage in our talk we have not talked about the Team. The point is that the central reality of the Charter is the couple. Father Caffarel used to say, *“The couple is the work of God.”*

And as Pope Pius XI used to say, *“mutual aid between the spouses is one of the essential aims of marriage.”*

That said, the couple, however motivated they may, be cannot make progress alone. They need help. And this is what the Charter reminds us of, *“Because they are aware of their weaknesses and limitations, because they experience daily how difficult it is to live up to the Christian ideal in our modern world, because they have unflinching faith in the power of fellowship and mutual help, they have decided to form themselves into a Team.”*

It is within the Team that each couple can help each other materially and above all spiritually. The Team is made up of 4 to 7 couples and a Spiritual Counsellor. It is important to note that the Team members do not choose each other and this is often a wonderful opportunity for fraternal charity.

The Charter explains the four demands of brotherly love: *“giving, receiving (which is harder than giving), asking (which is harder still), and knowing how to refuse (couples will not ask for help, if they are not certain of obtaining a straightforward answer, which may be a refusal).”* This fellowship and mutual help is particularly obvious at the Team meeting.

Father Caffarel said in 1959, *“All moments and all activities at the monthly meeting are orientated towards this mutual help and fellowship: the meal, the “general sharing” where we talk about our news, the joys, sorrows, failures and successes, where we ask for counsel and help; the “sharing,” this pitiless yet beneficial moment when everyone reports on how they respected the Charter’s obligations. Prayer and the exchange of views are also to be seen in this perspective as mutual help between the couples...”*⁴ Each person shares humbly, and in truth, their joys and difficulties, according to their personal journey and in return receives what the other Team members share.

If the mutual help between Team members, no matter beautiful it is, remains at that level, it could just be perceived as *“an exchange of good and friendly service.”* During the 1965 Lourdes Gathering, Father Caffarel gave a magnificent speech explaining the true meaning of mutual help between Team members. The idea is to reply to Christ’s urgent request on the eve of his Passion, *“Little children, I will be with you only a little longer. (...) A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”* (Jn 13:33-35).⁵ Father Caffarel therefore asked every Team member to exercise brotherly love within the Team’s framework in order to be able to love more widely.

And this brotherly love goes beyond mutual help and even ordinary friendship. It becomes stronger through perseverance, over time, even when after a few years of Team life the enthusiasm of its beginning sometimes fades. During this 1965 speech, Father Caffarel said, *“I would like you to remember this: A Team of Our Lady is a group of couples who become acquainted with and learn this brotherly love. It often turns out to be a tough introduction, because in dialoguing with others we learn to know ourselves, and what we*

⁴ Henri CAFFAREL, « Vocation et itinéraire des Équipes Notre-Dame, *L’Anneau d’Or*, n° 87-88, May-August 1959, p. 239-256.

⁵ « Les Équipes Notre-Dame au service du commandement nouveau », *L’Anneau d’Or*, n° 125, September-October 1965, p. 377-389.



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discover is not always very flattering. It is as if we were obliged to learn difficult competencies. How many times, in order to have courage to persevere, must we let Christ's instruction resound within us, 'My little children, as I have loved you, so you must love one another.'"

The aim of Team life is *"to love one another in order to better love God."*

Conclusion

So, there are you: a brief overview of the spirituality of Christian couples as proposed by Father Caffarel in order to journey towards holiness. It is certainly an edifying and demanding proposition. But adapted to the reality of couples' lives, those back in 1947, and even more so to those of today, whose journeys and religious practices are very varied, but whose wish is to make a success of their life as a couple is deep and very affected by the failures of couples surrounding them. Whether we talk about personal life, the couple's life or Team life, Christ is at the centre of the Teams of Our Lady's spirituality. He is the one who calls each couple to follow Him, even if all couples are not necessarily aware of this in the beginning. *"Come, follow me."* (Mt 19:21) Thanks to Father Caffarel, the Movement has been proposing a path for progression over the past 70 years, with concrete means, to progress gradually with the help of other couples in the Team towards Christ. This path leads and helps couples in the Teams of Our Lady Movement to become involved in, and commit to, the service of the Church and of the world in order to become missionaries. And to conclude with Father Caffarel's words, *"Just like the Church, of which it is a little cell, the true Christian couple cannot but be animated by an ardent missionary aspiration."*