



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

## GETTING TO THE SPIRITUAL SOURCES OF HIS VOCATION

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### **Introduction**

I am really very honoured to be able to be here with you to share with you some thoughts on the subject that I was asked to speak about: the spiritual sources of Father Caffarel's vocation. I would like to thank the Colloquium's organisers for entrusting me with this short communication, and in particular Monsignor Fleischmann and the Colloquium's Secretariat for the material they made available to me, and which enabled me to organise my talk, which will be in two parts: 1/ Father Caffarel's contemplative vocation; 2/ Teams of Our Lady and helping couples experience God.

### **1. Father Caffarel's Contemplative Vocation: "Almost a Monk"**

In the magazine, *Panorama Aujourd'hui*, Father Caffarel spoke of his "conversion" when Jesus Christ became Someone for him.<sup>1</sup> *"On that faraway March day, I knew that I was loved and that I loved and that henceforth between Him and I it would be for life. The die was cast."* This experience of the discovery of Jesus Christ's personal love for him was so strong that he considered that day to be his true birthday, *"My childhood began when I was twenty."*

At that moment, *"The die was cast"*, he thought of dedicating his whole life to prayer by retiring to the Trappist monastery of Notre-Dame des Dombes, where he had asked to be admitted. However, this was not to be, because his spiritual director, whose name we do not know, advised him to defer his entry. *"What about first doing a couple of years in a seminary? I gave in to his reasons and waited for the deadline. When it came around, he asked me to accept a new deadline; wait to be a priest, a further two years. And finally, I did not get the green light. Nonetheless, I was convinced that it was not an illusion, what I had previously considered to be my vocation."*

The sign of the truth of this contemplative vocation is the fact that he always cultivated an intense inner life that was, as he recognised, the secret of the fruitfulness of his ministry. *"But in the end, I understood that it was the Lord's ruse...If I had not felt this call to a life of prayer so deeply, I would not have felt the need to pray daily and to cut myself off for a few weeks every year in the silent and solitary life."*

We have Father Caffarel's testimonial about this "nostalgia for the monastery" in an interview with Jacques Chancel.<sup>2</sup> The essence of Father Caffarel's secret is to be found in that interview, where we can see that he truly was a 'man of prayer,' truly a man of God. *"I speak of God because it is God specifically, who conquered me some fifty years ago in the particular month of March 1923. That was the demarcation line in my life. There was a before and an after that particular day. God came into my life and ever since that particular day, I am in his service!"*

When he was asked if dealing only with God did not imply forgetting everything else and even the important questions for the life of man and the world, he answered, *"If I care about God, I care about everything, because everything is in God and God is at the beginning of everything, and I think precisely that only those who care about God can say that they care about everyone and everything!"*

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Claude Goure , July 1978.

<sup>2</sup> France-Inter, March 15th 1973.



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The fundamental existential question for Father Caffarel was to be faithful to God, at the original moment when the die was cast, when he realised that he was loved by Christ. *“I was not concerned about being faithful to myself, I was concerned with being faithful to the One who had conquered me and I would not boast of having been perfectly faithful to Him always! Perfect faithfulness is an impossible thing, it is something towards which we strive. Faithfulness is one of love’s demands, and indeed, when I was unfaithful, my love did not leave me peaceful!”*

This is why he considered himself to be, because of the providential circumstances that guided his life, “almost a monk,” because he was certain, at the time of his conversion, that the Trappist monastery was to be his place, he was expected there, but in the end, he let himself be guided by Providence and recognised that the monastery was to be founded within himself, *“And I think that maybe I ought to do what I do, but keep in the depths of myself this longing. To the extent that I have a monastery within me and I can retire to this monastery.”*

Father Caffarel experienced the monastery by cultivating an intense inner life of prayer and contemplation, which were sometimes experienced as a struggle. But he was convinced that *“men who pray are the lungs of humanity.”* A noteworthy influence on Father Caffarel’s life was that of blessed Vladimir Ghika, a Romanian prince, who converted to Catholicism in France in 1902, died a martyr of Communism in Bucharest in 1954 and was declared blessed in 2015. He became a priest in 1923 and founded Auberive, near Langres, “a sort of seminary for diverse, late or early vocations.” The young Caffarel stayed there from 1926 to 1928. Father Ghika used to say to those who entered Auberive, *“You only enter for love of God and you only stay for love of God”*, a slogan that Father Caffarel took over into Teams. The only acceptable intention for entering and staying in Teams is God: *“You come to Teams for God, you stay for God.”*<sup>3</sup>

Concerning the necessity for a strong experience in the encounter with the living God, that he encountered himself at the time of his conversion, Father Caffarel confessed that he was moved at one time by what happened in the Oriental spiritual traditions, in Hinduism for example, where it is recommended that every Hindu ought to experience being a monk, at least once in their lives. In Thailand, *“Some ancient custom states that at least once in their life, every man, even the king, ought to participate in monastic life for a couples of months. That made me think.”*<sup>4</sup>

According to the testimonies that he collected on this subject, he recognised that in the Western world, and even in monasteries, the practice of systematic prayer and meditation had been neglected. And this was why there was a weakening of faith in vast sectors of the Church. At Troussures, he wanted to offer to all those who wished, this possibility of an encounter with and the experience of the living God.

*“Serious thought needs to be given to the life plan proposed to men and women who, feeling a calling to be a monk for once in their life, ask for this experience. Much remains to be done, I realise that. But think how passionate such an experiment could be! Convents would resolutely undertake, with discernment and beneficence, to answer what I believe to be a need that many of our contemporaries would be the first to benefit from. As we wait for the more competent to get going, we are going to attempt a first trial in the House of Prayer at Troussures.”*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> « Pour Dieu », *La Lettre Mensuelle des Equipes Notre-Dame*, n° 3, December 1962.

<sup>4</sup> *Cahiers sur l’oraison*, n° 139, January-February 1975, p. 1-4.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*



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The house at Troussures was obviously important in Father Caffarel's own spiritual pilgrimage, for he left the Teams, not because he no longer believed in their charism and mystique, but because he was moved by an inner impetus to bring to fruition this call deep in his heart to belong totally to God, to exist in God and for God.

## **2. Teams of Our Lady and Helping Couples Experience God**

The origin of the Teams of Our Lady is to be found in Father Caffarel's marked concern to help couples who wished to experience holiness in accordance with their state in life. It is very interesting to note that the need to give the "groups"—as the Teams called themselves in the beginning—a Charter, promulgated on December 8th, 1947, in the crypt of St Augustin, found its inspiration in the religious and monastic tradition, whose secret of perseverance was the existence of a Rule, a methodology and pedagogy for holiness.

*"I will not hide the fact that the history of the Church, and the study of religious life inspired me and gave me the solution. I sought what could explain how holiness never ceased to flourish and re-flourish in religious orders throughout the ages, despite exterior and interior crises, and I understood that one of the essential factors of the solidity and vitality of these orders was their rule. I then asked myself, why not suggest a rule for married Christians who wish to progress spiritually? Not a monk's rule, but a rule for married laity."*<sup>6</sup>

The Charter therefore offered couples a pedagogy, a rule to help them strive for the ideal of holiness, a rule that was not the privilege of monks and priests, but also of all Christians. It offered a methodology to live out a spirituality and mystique exclusively centred on God and on the experience of God, that Father Caffarel wanted to share with couples, an ideal that was very important to him. *"The only true intention, the one that corresponds with the aim of Teams is the will to know God better, to love him better and to serve him better. ... The reason for entering, the reason for staying in Teams is religious, meaning relating to God."*<sup>7</sup>

And Father Caffarel recognised that his entire involvement in the spirituality and mystique of Teams was directly connected to his original vocation to enter a monastery, his true and unique vocation. *"If my priesthood has been useful in some way, I know that I owe it to the practice of prayer. The numerous retreats preached to first generation members of the Young Christian Workers organisation, the conjugal spirituality magazine, "L'Anneau d'Or", that I founded in 1945, "the Teams of Our Lady", "La Maison de Prière of Troussures", all are the direct consequences of my monastic vocation."*<sup>8</sup>

## **Conclusion**

From these short notes on the spiritual sources of Father Caffarel's vocation, we can draw some conclusions:

- a) The initial moment of his conversion: the fact of knowing that he was loved and loving was decisive. It changed the course of his life, which really began at that particular moment.

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<sup>6</sup> Henri CAFFAREL, « Vocation et itinéraire des Equipes Notre-Dame », *L'Anneau d'Or*, n° 87-88, mai-août 1959, p. 239-256.

<sup>7</sup> Henri CAFFAREL, "Pour Dieu", *Lettre Mensuelle des Équipes Notre-Dame*, n° 3, décembre 1962.

<sup>8</sup> *Panorama Aujourd'hui*, Entretien avec Claude Goure, juillet 1978.



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- b) The fulfilment of his conversion appeared to him originally in the form of the monastic life: men of prayer are truly the lungs of the world.
- c) Under the direction of his spiritual director, he was guided towards the priesthood, but that did not make him forget his original intention: a nostalgia for the monastery remained with him and inspired all his pastoral actions: helping people to experience God.
- d) Retiring to Troussures belongs to the last part of his life, but in fact it was his first intention. Father Caffarel's life thus shows extraordinary unity, a true harmony: the monastery desired, the monastery that remained hidden within him, the monastery at Troussures where he lived in silent contemplation until the end of his days.