

Father Caffarel

Of his life-changing Encounter:

“At age twenty, in just an instant, Jesus Christ became someone for me. Oh, nothing spectacular. On that far-off day of March 1923, I realized that I was loved and that I loved and that from now on between Him and me, it would be for life.” “The die was cast.”

“I have only one wish: for myself, to get further inside that intimacy with Christ, and that other desire to bring others to it, because it has been essential in my life. It has given me the joy for living, the grace for living, the momentum for living. So much so, that I cannot not wish upon others that encounter with the living Christ, this discovery that God is love.”

(Jean Allemand, Henri Caffarel, a man seized by God, END edition, p.15).

Four young couples in Paris in 1938 when they told him:

“This human love which is our joy and treasure, God must surely see it as something very beautiful and very great. We want to know about it – you must reveal it to us.”

(Rome 1959)

As their early meetings progressed he wrote:

“Little by little, the eminent place of marriage in God’s great design unfolded. It seemed to us to be totally ordained to the glory of the Lord. Its ends are the multiplication of sons and daughters of God and the mutual help of the spouses in the pursuit of holiness. There is no need to look elsewhere in order to progress towards the Lord: marriage is a sacred way and the Christian family is a living cell of the Church.”

(Rome 1959)

Fr. Caffarel:

‘Equipes Notre-Dame has as its essential aim, to help couples, to strive after holiness – no more, no less.’

Fr. Caffarel thought of how holiness in religious orders never ceases to blossom and re-blossom. He saw that the essential factor for the long lasting quality and vitality of these orders was their rule. He asked himself:

“Why, then should we not offer a rule to married Christians who want to progress spiritually? – not a rule for monks, but a rule for married lay men and women.”

Fr. Caffarel said:

“Everything withers when prayer is missing, everything is reborn, ripens, when prayer is present.”

(Rome 1970)

Responding to the risk of us becoming lukewarm or having a lack of time or other objections, Father Caffarel retorted:

“You haven’t got a guide? We will give you one, you can find some. You haven’t got time? You have time to eat and sleep, do not let your soul die of hunger!”

(Notes on Love and Grace 1955)

Five years later, he challenged Team members:

“If Teams do not succeed in giving you the taste and hunger to know God, if, after a few months or years, working at the study topic has not led you to acquire the habit of religious study, there can be little reason for the existence of our Teams. We were created to know, love and serve God. If we do not know Him in a living and constantly sustained way, let us have no illusion: we will not love and serve Him truly.”

(February 1960 editorial)

“Your love without demands diminishes me. Your demands without love discourages me. Your demanding love makes me grow.”

“Be demanding, you will never disappoint.”

“Whenever couples practice mutual help and fraternal love, their hearts grow little by little until soon their love reaches the home, their neighborhood, their country, until their love reaches the furthest shores.”

He was always very clear about the phases that Teams go through and he identified two very different stages:

“I am convinced that our Teams should be both a Movement of initiation and a Movement of perfection. If Teams were only a Movement of perfection, couples would hesitate to enter.On the other hand, if Teams were merely a Movement of Christian initiation, they would soon disappoint the very couples in whom they had instilled a desire for more growth.”

(Rome May 1959)

For priests who came and asked about their role in Teams he told them that:

“The Movement with its organisation and various methods – is essentially an instrument placed in the hands of a priest to help them to fulfil better their mission of spiritual educators of couples.”

(Conference 1959)

In 1970 when introducing the endeavor of personal contemplative prayer Fr. Caffarel stated:

“From now on it will be asked of each member of the Movement to consecrate a modest minimum of 10 minutes per day to reflective prayer, beginning with commitment.”

A few years later when he was stepping down and in his last editorial in 1973, he spoke of the importance of prayer and the dedication of the rest of his life in these words:

“I believe now more than ever, in the irreplaceable importance of prayer, and it is in this way that I want to help you and remain present with you. All my time during the years that I am still to live will, to the extent that it depends upon me, be devoted to prayer and helping others to pray.”

(A Dieu 1973)

Fr. Caffarel Quote:

“Future historians when speaking of the 20th century will no doubt call it ‘the century of the death of God’. He also warned that “formerly, atheism was the possession of the elite, now it has become an every day commodity.”

Father Caffarel writing to the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council said:

“The errors and influences which are creeping into Christian couples and undermining them should be investigated and also the failure in the pastoral ministry which explains their vulnerability.”

Father Caffarel’s quote:

“Your home will bear witness to God in a still more explicit fashion if it is the union of two searchers, where the intellect and the heart are thirsting to know and to meet God, to become united with Him, because they have understood that God is the great reality, because God interests them more than anything else.”

(May 1970).

In the early 1960’s Fr. Caffarel presented to the future Fathers of Vatican 11 his thoughts, experience and suggestions from his 25 years of ministry with couples.

(He himself was appointed consultant to the Apostolate of the Laity.)

He spoke of marriage as:

“the only community founded on a sacrament”

He spoke of the need for pastoral understanding and the ability to communicate and preach on:

“God’s thinking on all the realities of marriage: its sacramental character, its greatness, its laws: about love, fatherhood, motherhood, sexuality, procreation, education;”

He asked that the Council give guidance on moral theology:

“Moral theology taught to the faithful is often no more than a thesis on sexual relations. There will never be a renewal of Christian marriage until married Christians are offered a morality based on spiritual progress in and through that’ state in life’, sanctified and sanctifying, which is marriage.”

He asked that the Church develop a theology of marriage:

“It is necessary to have a clearer idea of the sacramentality of marriage, not to confine one’s thinking to the moral conception of the union of the spouses, but to focus on its mystical aspect, that is to say, its connection with the mystery of Christ, so as to have a clearer idea also of the nature, the aims, the properties, “the permanence” of the sacrament, the place of the Christian couple in the Church”

On preparation for marriage he said:

“The lack of preparation is the cause of innumerable matrimonial tragedies.”

On the other hand he highlighted the value of marriage preparation in its fullness which could:

“enable that an adult religion be discovered by Catholics who, for the most part have learnt nothing since the catechism before their first Communion.”

To protect marriage and particularly the young:

“It is necessary that the young should be capable of discerning their particular vocation and responding to it, fully aware of what is involved; that they be helped in procuring sound ideas about marriage, its nature, its purpose, its characteristics –.”

If these challenges are responded to he proposed that:

“There is an altogether positive and uplifting aspect of marriage which one would like to see being made known to our world. Given that in our time, just as in every other era, the human heart remains inhabited by the irrepressible hope of achieving perfect love in marriage, the content of this doctrine, in all its richness and beauty would have a good chance of finding an echo with our contemporaries.”

Finally, we believe that to respond to the challenges of today’s society and to communicate clearly to diverse cultures and particularly to the young, we need a clearer, simpler language of love; a language which can communicate the beauty of married love and a deep understanding of married spirituality.

Another Fr. Caffarel challenge to the Second Vatican Council:

“Married Christians are, for the most part, convinced that Christian perfection is not for them. This, once again, is the view of too many priests. That error is fatal: the person who is not aiming at perfection soon slides into mediocrity, into sin. One has here one of the explanations for the current decline of Christian marriage. As against this, what an impetus would one not create if one brought to the notice of couples Christ’s call to perfection, if one taught them that the essence of this perfection is to be found in Love, and not in the vows of the religious life, and that in itself marriage not only is not an obstacle but is a means of arriving at the perfecting of that Love.”

Father Caffarel’s challenge to Team members:

“What future might we not hope for the Church if Christ’s shining message on marriage could reach the four corners of the world, if it attracted large numbers of young couples, if it inspired an even greater number of families in which God was loved by all and above everything else?”

When asked for his opinion on what was the most important aspect of Team Life, after reflecting on the many gifts, he identified the most important:

“There is there, in the midst of these couples gathered together in a room in an apartment, the intense presence of the Risen Lord, alive, attentive to all, loving all of them, with their mixture of good and bad, and anxious to help them to become the kind of people they want to be. He is there, as on the evening of the Resurrection, in the upper room in Jerusalem, when He appeared suddenly to those other team members, the apostles. He breathed on them, saying: ‘Receive – the Holy Spirit.’ And they became new men. Jesus Christ, in the midst of couples, does not fail to impart His Spirit to them; and those who

open themselves to His Spirit – this is something that people learn gradually – become people of the Spirit. And the whole meeting is animated by the Spirit. To these men and women who, in the evening, after a hard day, often arrive exhausted and weighed down with worries, this Spirit communicates Christ's twofold passion: His impatience for the glory of His Father, and His burning and gentle pity for the crowds 'who are like sheep without a shepherd.'

What I have just described is not what it always is, but how it ought to be. For a meeting of a team which is not first and foremost a joint effort to meet Jesus is something completely different from a meeting of a Team of Our Lady."

(Lettre Mensuelle Equipes Notre-Dame March April 1973)

Pope John Paul 11 spoke of Fr. Caffarel at a Meeting of Leaders of Teams of Our Lady in 2003:

"Fr. Caffarel taught the greatness and beauty of the vocation of marriage, and, anticipating the fruitful orientations of the Second Vatican Council, he highlighted the call to holiness linked to married and family life. He knew how to bring out the major aspects of a specific married spirituality that flows from baptism and that underlines the dignity of human love in the plan of God."

(John Paul 11 Rome 2003)

In 1965 Pope Paul VI described Equipes Notre-Dame as:

"the smiling face of the Church."

In 1976 Pope Paul the VI gave a reminder to Team members of our responsibilities when he said:

"Innumerable couples will be grateful to you for the help you bring to them; in fact most couples are in need of help."

Cardinal Archbishop of Paris in September 1996 re Fr. Caffarel:

"One of the great figures given by God to his Church in the course of this century."

Taken from presentation by
John and Elaine Cogavin
International Leading Team
Equipes Notre-Dame