



Teams of Our Lady

## FATHER HENRI CAFFAREL'S LEGACY

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### Introduction

Father Henri Caffarel, who died on the 18th of September 1996, was born on the 30th July 1903. In this year of the centenary of his birth and in the context of our gathering of Regional Couples, accompanied by many Spiritual Counsellors, we need to be aware of the legacy that this exceptional priest, founder of the Teams of Our Lady, has left us.

It is obviously not my intention to retrace the life and work of Father Caffarel. Jean Allemand has already done so with competence and skill; and no doubt you know that he has more recently produced a beautiful outline of his spirituality in the booklet "*Praying 15 days with Father Caffarel*".

Together with the International Leading Team, we thought it would be useful to highlight a few essential aspects of what Father Caffarel has contributed to the Teams through his teaching and his numerous writings with regard to the creation, expansion and animation of our Movement. He, himself, when he looked back at the past, was eager to draw lessons from it for the future. This is what it falls to us to do now, in these early years of the new millennium, being at the head of a movement centred on marriage.

We have to make choices. I will consider four essential points on which we still have much reflecting to do, if we wish to be both faithful to the "founding charism" of Teams and to keep it alive in a context that is often different to the one that the first generation knew. Let us recall that, at Chantilly in 1987, fourteen years after leaving the leadership of Teams, Father Caffarel led an impressive work of reflection on the founding charism. With great lucidity, he carried out an appraisal comparing past and present. He left to the creativity of those continuing the work the responsibility of directing the future of the Movement.

### The spirituality of the couple

*Around 1940, there were few movements for couples as such. The commitments on offer within the Church were available separately for men and women. There was segregation, even at a first communion Mass! At the request of some young couples, and with their active participation, Father Caffarel began the task of discerning the basis of a spirituality for married couples.*

*At that time, spirituality was looked upon as the preserve of Religious and celibates, while marriage was more or less disparaged. One could say also - more often than not - sexuality was understood in pious circles as a kind of unavoidable concession for procreation and 'to appease the desires of the flesh'; its Christian meaning was hardly explored at all.*

*For his part, Henri Caffarel asserted that lay people must "clearly define the means and methods that would constitute the spirituality of a married Christian" (Talk to Responsible Couples of Teams, 1952).*

I have read with interest the early editorials of the 'Letters to Teams'. For example, in June 1950, Father Caffarel defined spirituality as follows: "*Spirituality is the science that deals with Christian life and the ways that lead to its full blossoming*". Straight away, Father Caffarel made clear that, for couples seeking to develop their spirituality, it was not a question of *running away from the world, but to learn, following Christ's example, how to serve God in the whole of their life and fully in the world*. They must discover that spirituality does not consist simply of certain actions, such as praying or practising asceticism, but that it entails the service of God where they live, in their family, at work, in society.

¶ At the heart of the spiritual perspective that Father Caffarel opens up for couples, he places his thoughts on love and on the close link between God's love and human love. This is the key.

*"Human love is the reference point that helps us to understand divine love. By its power to make two beings into one, whilst preserving their individual personalities, love allows us to acquire an understanding of the mysterious union of Christ with humanity and of the spiritual marriage of the soul with its God"* ("Notes on love and grace", p. 44).

We have here a vital point: starting with the experience of love within the couple, we can discover God's love, his faithfulness and his desire for our good. At one and the same time, the spouses desire each other's happiness at the human level and at the level of religious growth. Without this double dimension, their love would remain imperfect – Father Caffarel even says it would be *mutilated*.

¶ To develop spirituality, Father Caffarel places the emphasis on discerning the true objective of the spiritual life. In a vigorous editorial that he simply entitled "*Goal number one*", he shows that, among other objectives such as the apprenticeship of prayer and the study of Christian thought – which we must not abandon – we must highlight 'number one': "*UNION WITH CHRIST, that is to say, the imitation of Christ at all times and in all the activities of life. This is the goal*" (February 1950 editorial).

We find ourselves at the peak of the spirituality of Saint Paul himself. The goal is radical. Father Caffarel never liked half measures. By the 'demands of spirituality', he means "taking a correct aim". It is true that the Christian life entails adhering to a doctrine, practising a moral code and participating in a living organism that is the Mystical Body; but "*to be a Christian is, first and foremost, a man-God relationship, an irrevocable covenant and an unconditional submission to Christ in which everything is pooled*" ("Notes on love and grace", p. 160).

¶ If we ask ourselves where this spiritual covenant with Christ is actualised, Father Caffarel immediately places the Eucharist at the centre of his perspective. Nevertheless, he hastens to add that this sacrament must not be isolated from other indispensable elements of the Christian life: the development of faith by regular contact with the Word of God, meditative prayer and a living and effective love of neighbour (see March 1958 editorial).

Father Caffarel analyses the way that a couple lives out the Eucharist. In "*Marriage, a way to God*", there is a fine article of his on "*Marriage and the Eucharist*". Even if it means encroaching a little on my second point, I must here and now outline his thoughts on the subject.

He begins with a meditation on the words of Jesus in Capernaum: "*He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I live in him*" (Jn 6: 56-57). And he goes on: "*Husband and wife, you who eat the flesh of Christ, who drink his blood, who live the life of Christ in your soul and in your body, who live in him and he in you, how can you not love one another with a love that is totally different from that of other human beings: a risen love?*".

The union of two persons is enriched by the very life of Christ that they share, together with a "*joyful knowledge of the Father and an upsurge of filial love*". In communion with Christ, the love of the spouses is transformed by the grace of the Eucharist that gives it "*purification, newness of life*", and which leads to the desire to share "*the love and joy of God: holiness*". ("Marriage, a way to God", pp 253-254).

Going into even greater depth, Father Caffarel says to the couple that, if Christ renews at Mass his unique offering on the Cross, it is "*because he wants his sacrifice to penetrate to the very physical and spiritual depth of your couple, so as to create in you also a permanent attitude of offering to the Father*" ("Marriage, a way to God", p. 261). In other words, just as Christ lives his sacrifice in the Church at Mass, he wants to live it within the couple who are habitually in an attitude of true self-giving: both give themselves to each other and together offer their love to God from whom, through Christ, they have received everything.

¶ Father Caffarel knows how to give the proper depth of meaning to the birth and presence of children in the home. I was struck by these two sentences in “*Notes on love and grace*” (p 44):

*“The Creator has made love the irreplaceable collaborator of his fatherhood. Out of love for love, God has bound his own hands: he will have no other posterity than that which will be given him by the union of man and woman”.* And further on he says: “*Spouses, recognise the beating of God’s heart in your ardent desire for a child at the most intimate moment of your love*”.

Thus, fecundity and the capacity to give birth, are a gift of God, a share in his own fatherhood; and the desire to give life inseparably links the love of the couple with the love of God present in the couple. As Father Caffarel says elsewhere, the procreation and education of children show forth the spouses’ ‘*agape-love*’ by which they live and which they aspire to communicate (See: “*Marriage, a way to God*”, p. 288).

With regards to education, spiritual education has first place. Father Caffarel asks that couples should “form seekers of God”, who read the Bible and pray together, integrating in family prayer some elements of the liturgical prayer of the Church.

¶ An aspect not to be neglected in what Father Caffarel calls “*the mystical life of the Christian couple*”, is the sense of sin and of God’s forgiveness; for the couple’s spirituality is not to be ‘idealised’. At times of mutual incomprehension, incompatibility and of the various forms of evil that cause divisions, Christian spouses have to discover that they are sinners.

Failures in love make us aware that love itself needs to be saved. Father Caffarel ends a paragraph entitled “*Sinful, repentant and forgiven community*”, with the following words: “*If admitting the painful discovery [of being sinners], their conjugal community at last becomes a penitent community within the larger penitent community of the Church, and has recourse to their Lord of whose presence and concern they have no doubt, then, opening themselves to forgiveness, they will find fresh hope*” (“*Marriage, this great sacrament*”, pp. 332-333).

## **The sacrament of marriage**

¶ Father Caffarel’s thoughts on the sacrament of marriage constitute one of the outstanding aspects of his legacy. They include not only a far-reaching work of research but also the constant concern to decipher the reality of married life in the light of its union with Christ. In Rome in 1959, he expressed in a few words the essence of it:

*“Sacramental Christian marriage, not only represents the loving union between Christ and the Church, but makes the couple share in this union. I mean to say that, thanks to the sacrament of marriage, the love that unites Christ with the Church is the very same love that works to unite, to enliven and give joy to the husband and wife”* (“*The Teams of Our Lady, growth and mission of Christian Couples*”, p. 61)

We must distance ourselves from a concept that would only see in marriage a helping hand from God to strengthen or heal human love. It would amount to putting grace at the service of a degree of comfort. This does not prevent Christian spouses from developing all the human qualities of their married life, since it is in the reality of that life that grace acts to make them progress in holiness.

¶ As we know, the fundamental theme, following St. Paul, is to see marriage as closely linked to the union of Christ with the Church and, as in the Old Testament, to the marriage of God with his people. Father Caffarel asks himself: “*In what way does marriage call to mind the union of Christ with the Church?*”.

In essence, marriage is in itself a mystery of union, of intimacy, of bodies, of minds, of hearts and of activities: it brings to mind the union of Christ with the members of his Body.

This union extends to the couple's sharing in suffering, since the Cross seals the total union of Christ with humanity. Marriage is also fecundity, the radiance of Christ's love, in the image of all that the Lord causes to be born through his boundless love. Finally, joy draws the Christian couple close to the glory of their Lord: *"the joy of having a possession that cannot be taken away"* (*"Notes on love and grace"*, pp. 69-71).

The experience of love allows a human being to contemplate that secret of God which is the marriage of the Son with humanity. But there is more to it than that, I quote: *"God's last word on human love - that which we can repeat but not explain - is that love, consecrated in marriage, is destined to cause to flow into our hearts a little of that divine charity that unites Christ with the Church"* (*ibid.*, p. 71). The consequence of this is that, the life of the couple, their parenthood and the radiance of their love, share in the mission of Christ and of the Church.

The sacrament of marriage expresses the union of Christ with the Church and this prepares the ground to communicate the mystery in the Eucharist in which is to be found *"the infinite gift and fullness of life"* (*ibid.*, p. 72).

¶ The field of influence of the sacramental grace, Father Caffarel tells us, is the man and the woman, together with all that becomes one with them, what extends them: children, house etc. In other words, the impact of redemptive incarnation extends to making a 'sacrament' of *"the totality of marriage in all its juridical, physical and spiritual reality... to such an extent that the physical union of husband and wife is an integral part of the sacrament. The whole of married life is not only healed, elevated, sanctified, but is rendered sanctifying"* (*"Marriage, this great Sacrament"*, p. 315).

¶ In the same context, Father Caffarel shows us that the sacrament of marriage - in which the active presence of Christ is so deeply involved - is an essential element in the work of constructing the Church. It was not instituted purely for the benefit of those who are married. Indeed, Christ takes couples whom he sanctifies in order to make them living stones of his Church. He does not take them out of the world. He transmits to them, there where they are, his grace that penetrates to the foundations of the couple. By the sacrament of marriage, couples are made partakers in the building-up of the Body of Christ at the very heart of human society of which they are part.

It seems to me that Father Caffarel is one of the group who have popularised anew the traditional concept of the consecrated couple as a *cell of the Church*, *"in the sense of a small visible Christian community within the greater community of the parish; but - even more deeply - in the sense of a living element of the great spiritual society of the Church"* (*ibid.* p. 317). This amounts to saying that the couple is not just a subdivision of the parish or of the universal Church, but that the life of the couple has in itself much of what characterises the Church. Where a Christian couple lives, there the Church already begins to live.

Father Caffarel has outlined the conditions for a gathering of Christians to constitute an *Ecclesia*. We can get a taste of it from the following extract that I quote word for word:

*"A little 'Ecclesia' is a cell of the Church; Christ is present in her. She is the Bride of Christ who converses with Him. Christ takes hold of her to communicate his double love. She then discovers, in Christ and through Christ, the Holy Spirit whom Christ imparts to her, and the Father towards whom the Holy Spirit leads her"* (Sao Paolo Conference, July 1957).

## **Prayer – Contemplative prayer**

We know how much effort Father Caffarel put - taxing his strength to the very limit - into leading lay people to experience prayer. He devoted the last years of his life to it [in his 'House of Prayer'] at Troussures, with its memorable weeks of prayer. Let us also recall the

“*Notebooks on Contemplative Prayer*”, or the evenings that he presided over at the ‘Mutualité’ in Paris, attended by large and enthusiastic audiences.

In this talk I will only touch lightly on the subject; a subject that is so important; but I know you have experienced its great spiritual riches that our founder revealed for Teams, as for many other lay people.

¶ Father Caffarel frequently returned to the theme of how essential prayer is. Sacramental life cannot do without it. In the November 1952 *Teams Letter*, he writes: “*The Eucharist in a soul that does not pray, is like seed in non-ploughed earth: it cannot bear fruit*”.

When preparing the 1954 Pentecost pilgrimage to Lourdes, he began with a statement that he often reverted to: the Lord promises his presence to a gathering “*where two or three are gathered...*”. But Jesus also said: “*When you want to pray... pray to your Father who is in that secret place*” (Mt 6: 6). Even during a vast pilgrimage, Father Caffarel called for personal prayer: “*To be satisfied at being in a crowd around Christ without seeking to make personal contact and establish a personal relationship with him, would be showing a lot of indifference*” (May 1954 *Teams Letter*).

Each of us must embark on this secret path, the only path that allows us to join Christ personally. “*Nobody can lead you to this secret – and narrow – path. It is for each one of you to discover it. Be humble, pure, docile, praying, persevering and you will find it - and you will meet Christ*” (*ibid.*).

¶ According to Father Caffarel, contemplative prayer is within the reach of lay people, especially if it is nourished by the Word of God and if it remains linked to the liturgical prayer of the Church and to sacramental life. He wrote a remarkable editorial in 1955 that was published in “*Notes on love and grace*”, under the heading: “*So many failures*” (pp. 127-130). It was always his wish to react to the loss of dynamism, to lukewarmness. He did so by recalling three “vital needs”:

1. The Eucharist: the pervading materialism should not make us abandon it since Christ chose daily bread in order to give himself to us.
2. The “living, re-creative” Word of God: “*It is not surprising that the divine life of faith, hope and love declines and becomes extinguished in the person who forgets to listen to the God that speaks to him/her*”.
3. “*Contemplative prayer is no less necessary. It saves our soul from suffocation. The soul, sustained by the bread of the Word and by the Eucharistic bread, becomes alive and active. It responds to God who speaks to it, it surrenders to God who gave himself to it. Between God and the soul, a living exchange sets in: a communion to which all love aspires. Then, little by little, it is the whole life of those who practise Contemplative prayer that ‘becomes prayer’ - because they practise it.*”

To those who raised objections, Father Caffarel always firmly 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!*” (see “*Notes on love and grace*”, pp. 129-130).

¶ This is not the place to make an exhaustive study of Father Caffarel’s constant teaching on prayer. You are acquainted with the “*Hundred letters on prayer*”, published in a book entitled “*Present to God*”, or the “*Five evenings on interior prayer*”. I would simply like to quote Father Caffarel’s words again, for he knows better than most authors how to present the reality of the experience of contemplative prayer. Let me first make a short remark on this subject, regarding translations, in particular: the French word ‘oraison’ does not necessarily have the same meaning as similar terms in other languages. In order to understand better, let us listen to Father Caffarel himself:

*“Contemplative prayer entails leaving the tumultuous outskirts of our being. It consists in collecting and putting together all our faculties and in plunging into the arid night towards the depth of our soul. There, on the threshold of the sanctuary, all we need to do is to be silent and attentive. It is not a matter of spiritual sensation, of interior experience, but of faith: that is to say, to believe in the Presence, to Adore the living Trinity in silence, to offer and open ourselves to its life as it gushes forth, to adhere to and enter into communion with its eternal Activity.*

*Little by little, from year to year, the cutting edge of our spiritual being, refined by grace, will become more sensitive to the ‘breath of God’ in us, to the Spirit of love. ... Our external life will then be the manifestation, the ‘epiphany’ of our interior life. It will be holy because, in the depth of our being, we will be closely united to God the Holy One”* (see: “*One Hundred Letters*”. p. 12).

¶ A 1957 editorial was entitled “Making a plea for contemplative prayer”. It was revised and incorporated in “*One Hundred Letters*” n. 5 under the title of “*Present to God*”. It says a little more to us on the nature of contemplative prayer:

*“Clement of Alexandria wrote: ‘Contemplative prayer – dare I say – is a conversation with God’. For Saint Teresa of Avila, contemplative prayer is ‘a friendly exchange in which we have a one-to-one talk with the God we know loves us’.*

*These references to ‘conversation’ and ‘talk’ are liable to lead to misunderstanding, by letting us believe that contemplative prayer consists essentially in an interior conversation with God, whereas it is a living act that involves us totally. Contemplative prayer is a deep orientation of the soul, an attitude of attention, being present to God with our whole being: body and soul, with all our awakened faculties”*

Were we to ask ourselves what importance or what impact has contemplative prayer, Father Caffarel would reply: “Why does contemplative prayer possess such great power ? Once again, it is because it is not a human activity but God’s activity in a human being, an activity to which the human being is associated. Christ said: ‘My Father and I act unceasingly’. People who pray come close, in themselves, to the all-powerful divine activity; they surrender themselves to it, co-operate with it, give it the means to penetrate a world that would otherwise be closed to it.” (“*One Hundred Letters*”, p. 161).

¶ We are very well aware of how Father Caffarel stressed the importance of prayer in the life of the couple:

- conjugal prayer, that seems so difficult to many team members,
- family prayer, that does not replace totally prayer as a couple,
- prayer at its proper place in the team meeting,
- immersing oneself in prayer during retreats, in a strict silence which some found rather hard.

Father Caffarel went repeatedly on the offensive to invite people to a life of prayer, linked to sacramental life and to daily life. We must continue on the same lines, for the risk of weakening in our spirit of prayer is no less real now than it was then. It would not be amiss to read the Charter again from time to time.

## **The founding of Teams – The demands they make**

There is no doubt that Father Caffarel’s principal legacy was the founding of the Teams of Our Lady. The development of Teams in many countries – of which your presence is the proof – shows convincingly that this legacy is very much alive.

I would like, within the limitations of this talk, to refer to just a few aspects of Father Caffarel’s work and of his achievement, by way of extending what I have already said. I

will base my remarks on two of his talks: “*The objectives of the Movement*”, a talk given to Responsible Couples of Teams in 1952, and later, his talk to European Regional Couples at Chantilly in 1987, 40 years after the promulgation of the Charter.

In 1952, he outlined the objectives of the Movement in four points:

1. A ‘School’ of Christian Life: “*to acquire an understanding of the Christian life, of what it is, of all the wealth of doctrine*”, and especially to discover the Scriptures in the light of tradition. “*It is the Christian life, as a whole, in all its fullness, that we must try to discover in the Teams of Our Lady, because team members must want to live with Christ, like Christ, through Christ, everywhere, in their marriage - certainly - in their relationship with their children - certainly - but also in their job, in society, in the parish, and in their free time*”.

We do not seek only to “convince intellectually”, but to help one another to live this Christian life in all its perfection: to help one another to put into practice what we discover. Everything is directed towards mutual help: material mutual help, mutual help in the face of emotional difficulties, mutual help to discover better together the dimensions of charity.

“*All the means of the Teams of Our Lady, all their obligations given in the Charter, have no other objectives than to help members to discover and practise the perfection of charity*”. For example: the ‘Pooling’ (sharing on life) at the team meeting, the Rule of Life of each member, the ‘Sit-down’.

2. A Research Laboratory for the spirituality of lay married Christians

I have already spoken about this. Let us note that team members are called to reflect on how to live out in marriage the “Evangelical counsels” of poverty and chastity. It is, as always, a question of “adjusting their life to the Gospel”.

3. A Centre for Spreading married spirituality: One of the objectives is to help in the preparation of young people for marriage. Furthermore, Father Caffarel asked Teams, not only to work at their own expansion, but also, following a “policy of concentric circles”, to awaken other couples to spirituality through participation in retreats or days of recollection and by means of conferences arranged in urban centres.
4. A Witness: Quite simply the witness of fraternal charity in the spirit of the words of Jesus: “*By this love you have for one another, everyone will know that you are my disciples*” (Jn 13: 13). The Charter says that Teams couples “*want their love, sanctified by the sacrament of matrimony, to give glory to God, to bear witness to men that Christ has redeemed love...*”

Father Caffarel reacted as follows to the reproach often made to Teams that they consider themselves an elite, shut in upon themselves: “*I would like to invite you to be both proud and modest. To be proud, because we have a mission to fulfil – a limited mission, admittedly – but a mission all the same. But at the same time, I want you to have a very strong awareness of our poverty. We are sinners and therefore we are not to boast about the mission we have received, but on the contrary to feel the weight of it. But, beware! Modesty and Christian humility, must not be something that serves to undermine our courage*”.

¶ Thirty years later, in 1987, Father Caffarel sketched out a balance sheet. He rejoiced at how much of the founding charism had been well understood, beginning with the “*reconciliation of love and marriage*”, the discovery of God’s thinking on the couple and on all the realities of the life of the couple and the family. He praised God: “*through the ‘marriage’ of our two sacraments*”, marriage and holy orders: you know the importance that the Movement attaches to the active presence of the priest in Teams.

He noted what had seemed less good, namely: in relation to love, self-denial, the gift of self, forgetting oneself. We have not gone deeply enough into the Christian meaning of

sexuality. He said: “*We need to guide couples towards the perfection of sexual life*”. He hoped that the mission of Teams in the Church would be to urge a renewal of an anthropology that would stop ignoring the complementarity of the sexes and that would reject the Manichaeian concept of ‘good - evil’, ‘soul – body’. We need to develop mutual help in order to advance towards holiness: a dynamic, active holiness, participating in the evolution of creation.

Father Caffarel mentioned points which were not relevant to the first generations of Teams couples: couples who have not received a catechetical formation and who may not attend mass on Sunday. There is the whole question of moral rules taught by the Church and poorly observed. As well as this, paying more attention to those who want to progress further after twenty or thirty years in Teams. There is the question of helping couples to grow old gracefully, showing them, how to spend their retirement, and how to face approaching death.

¶ To complete these notes on the meaning of the founding of Teams, we must mention again a decision of capital importance which, incidentally, is illustrated by this gathering. As the Movement had developed in more and more countries, the decision was taken, jointly with the Leading Team, to remain a single Movement across frontiers.

*“The upsurge of the Teams of Our Lady beyond frontiers and oceans created a new problem. Should we look for an autonomous national leadership in each country or should we think of a big Movement with a single leadership?”* After having debated the question, the option of a single movement was chosen – and not because it was the easier option . *“At the level of spirituality, there are no frontiers”* (*“Vocation and itinerary of the Teams of Our Lady”*, Rome, May 1959). Father Caffarel laid stress on the international character of the Leading Team, but also on filial submission to the hierarchy of the local Church, in each country, in each diocese.

## **Our Lady**

I would like, in conclusion, to call to mind again a favourite theme of Father Caffarel’s. It was not by chance that Teams were given the name of *Our Lady*. Fr.Caffarel had a strong devotion to the Mother of the Lord and showed his confidence in her intercession. I will quote a few lines from an editorial in which his starting point is that Christ himself loves his Mother, *“his dearest love among all creatures: his first love after that for his Father. Is it possible for this love for the Virgin not to be in me if I am united to Christ? But, beware! This love of Our Lady is not a soft sentimental love: it is wonder at the most radiant and holy of creatures; it is filial gratitude for the most Motherly of all mothers; it is an active will to please her, to help her in her task which is precisely that of motherhood of all humanity”* (May 1952 Letter).

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I have only been able to sketch out certain elements of the legacy that Father Caffarel has left us. It is up to us to make it bear fruit. Our responsibility is to prepare, on solid spiritual foundations and in the light of society’s evolution, the orientations that will allow the Teams of Our Lady to live by the New Covenant to which Christ calls couples of all generations.