



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

FATHER CAFFAREL, A MAN OF FAITH

Father Paul-Dominique Marcovits, o.p.

We only have a few photos of Father Caffarel. There is one that illustrates the back of the bookmark on which the prayer asking for his canonisation is to be found. It is a magnificent photo. Father Caffarel is wearing a black cassock. The ceremonial cape can almost be distinguished. He turns his face slightly towards the left to look at someone, who is placed slightly higher than him and who we do not see in the photo: Pope John XXIII. What is amazing is the light that springs from Father Caffarel. His face shines, he harbours a large smile and his eyes sparkle with joy. His hands seem to humbly hide a roll of paper, probably the text of his speech to the good Pope. He is filled with happiness and there is nothing austere about him. Being with the Pope in St Peter's, being accompanied by thousands of Team members; it was undoubtedly a great day... And yet, this joy is only the surface of a very deep joy that always filled him. What emerges from Father Caffarel is the depth of his heart, his faith, his total attachment to Christ and to His Church, represented by the Pope. Father Caffarel's faith is expressed in this image. Maybe he has the same attitude in heaven: his face raised towards the Lord, joyfully, listening to what the Lord tells him about us. I use the word "joyfully" because, and we will come across it again and again, optimism imbued everything from his remarks about marriage, about widowhood, and the joy with which he welcomed those on retreat in Troussures for a week of prayer. He used to open his arms and say, "*The Lord is waiting for you!*"

Father Caffarel, a man of faith.

Firstly, we will look at the fertile background of believers into which the young Henri Caffarel was born and we will see how his faith grew, how his affection for the Lord was fortified. Then, we will comment upon the story of his conversion. There, in its rudiments, was where his spiritual personality was to be found. And finally, we will see how the Lord was always at the heart of everything that he founded. He was a prophet.

I. Young Caffarel's Faith

1. A Christian Family

If faith is God's gift to someone, faith is also embodied in a human environment, in a social framework. Father Caffarel was born in Lyon in 1903 into a family of believers, who were open to the problems of the Church and society. During our first Colloquium at the Collège des Bernardins in December 2010, Michel Dealberti, the son of Father Caffarel's first cousin, highlighted the cultural, societal and religious richness of the Caffarel, Voisin, Venard and Thomasset families, who were linked to Lyonnais life (University, Fourvière (a district of Lyon), charity works) as well as to all the twists and turns of the French Church. Let us also note that as well as Father Caffarel, the Voisin and Venard families provided numerous priests, clergymen and nuns in Father Caffarel's own generation, in preceding generations and in the following generation too. Henri Caffarel therefore was part of a cultivated, open and generous environment. As Michel Dealberti related, "*From his youngest age, Henri Caffarel was steeped in a family engaged in extremely important*



Henri Caffarel, prophète pour notre temps

Colloque International – 8 & 9 Décembre 2017

cultural and religious activities, where all currents of the 20th century Catholic Church were represented and in an atmosphere where faith and charity were not empty promises.”¹

I remind you of this speech from our first Colloquium in order to explain that Father Caffarel’s faith did not spring forth in him spontaneously, like a thunderbolt that suddenly came from the will of God! Father Caffarel also was not “converted” in an extraordinary manner. Unlike Claudel², whom he admired so much. No, everything began and grew with the grace of his baptism.

2. A Christian Student

As a secondary-school student, he was involved in study groups in the Parish of St John, Lyon and also in the Catholic Youth Association. After leaving school, the young Caffarel entered Law School in Lyon and often went to the House for Catholic Students. His faith, therefore, matured throughout his youth. This is an account that sheds light on the way of his faith. *“I was a student. With four or five other students, we formed a small group and often there was a young priest with us, hardly a few years older than us. We got together frequently to meditate and reflect upon the Gospel. We were very happy to seek out Christ, His aspect and to try to discover His message in the Gospels. (...) One day, we read - I can’t remember which page of the Gospel - and within us there was so much joy and enthusiasm in discovering this aspect of Christ that we will never cease to appreciate all the richness. And one of us said to the priest, “But you don’t seem to be doing so well today.” Indeed, he was less enthusiastic than usual, he was serious and distant. (...) Then he uttered some words that disconcerted us, “When you wish to know the quality of your love for Christ, ask yourselves first of all about your love for the Church.”³*

These words of the young priest about Christ and the Church were so often repeated by Father Caffarel that they were usually attributed to him.

An affection for and attachment to Christ was present in Father Caffarel’s heart from his youth. An attachment that the reading of the Gospel nourished, that the Church’s teachings fortified, that the fidelity of his family supported and that the fraternity with other students awakened. But if Henri Caffarel was already attached to Christ, he also open to the Church thanks, in particular, to the words of that young priest who, probably, had some difficulties with it, but was faithful to it, thanks to Christ. We have there, in embryonic fashion, what was to become Father Caffarel’s faith in Christ and in His Church, inseparable. That is already what gives Father Caffarel his Christian equilibrium.

3. A First Inkling of Priesthood

A joyful attachment to Christ and His Church. In the background of this picture that I have just depicted, we must also take into account the retreat he made at the Marist College, Lyon, *“where the first inkling of priesthood was born in him.”⁴* He was eighteen years old. The Lord was soon to clarify His presence, was to manifest Himself to him in a particular light and it would be decisive for his whole life. This is what Father Caffarel’s accounts of vocation show and what we are going to explore.

One more point. It would appear that the reading of a book, given to him by one of his classmates, became the opportunity for his encounter with the Lord. He was reading the *Spiritual Writings* of an Italian Visitation nun, Sister Benigna Ferrero (1885-1916). A phrase of the Lord’s to this nun ought to be

¹ LE PÈRE CAFFAREL. *Des Équipes Notre-Dame à la Maison de prière, 1903-1996*, Actes du colloque (Paris, Collège des Bernardins, 3-4 décembre 2010), Éditions Lethielleux, 2011, p. 41.

² Paul CLAUDEL, poet, dramatist and diplomat who in 1886 experienced a sudden conversion aged eighteen whilst singing vespers in the Cathedral of Notre Dame, Paris.

³ Henri CAFFAREL, « Qu’est-ce que l’Église ? », Conférence aux responsables régionaux des Équipes Notre-Dame, Archives Equipes Notre-Dame, 1968.

⁴ Jean ALLEMAND, *Henri Caffarel, un homme saisi par Dieu*, Équipes Notre-Dame, 1997, p. 13.



Henri Caffarel, prophète pour notre temps

Colloque International – 8 & 9 Décembre 2017

remembered, *“Confidence is the key which opens the treasure of My mercy.”* A phrase that can awaken a life of dialogue with the Lord. In any case, the Lord’s love was to touch and move the young Caffarel.

II. Father Caffarel’s Vocation

1. Two Accounts of his Vocation

Permit me to introduce you to the two great accounts of his vocation that Father Caffarel left us. The first is the most well-known one and was published in *Panorama aujourd’hui* (a French Christian monthly magazine) in July 1978⁵. Through its brevity, precision and in its purity, the most important things are said and we are placed before God. The second account comes from the farewell speech Father Caffarel gave to the Sector Responsible Couples of the Teams of Our Lady, March 25th, 1973 and it is an account whose spiritual dynamism touches us just as profoundly.⁶

Here then is the first account:

“March 1923. At the age of twenty, Jesus Christ, in an instant, became someone for me. Oh, nothing spectacular. 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. That was it.”

And the second one:

“In essence, the beginnings of the Movement go back well beyond these 35 years. They go back 50 years, because in the month of March 1923, exactly 50 years ago, one day I became aware of Christ’s existence, Christ’s life, Christ’s love, the relationship of love between Christ and man that makes up Christian life, and for me that was the moment of the parting of the waters. For me, there was a before that month of March 1923 and an after that month of March 1923. I was marked by that and, from that day onwards, I had a desire: to enter more closely into that intimacy with Christ and another desire to bring others to the same, because it was vital to my life, it gave me “la joie de vivre”, the grace to live, a motivation to live. And equally, I could only wish that others too would have this encounter with the living Christ; this discovery that God is love.”

These two accounts shed light on each other. They have the same structure. In the first account, everything is already said: the suddenness of the call, *“in an instant”*; the personal encounter, *“Jesus became someone”*; the reciprocity of love, *“I knew that I was loved and that I loved”*; and finally, the radicalism, *“That was it.”* The second account, that appears to have more momentum, explains the same encounter again with accents of incomparable joy. And so, I would say that Father Caffarel tells of a unique, dense, intense event that was forever present in his mind and continued to energise him. And others who tell of their own vocation do so with similar respect and joy.

2. Comments

A few comments on these two accounts:

How can we not be struck by the enthusiasm with which Father Caffarel speaks of his encounter with the Lord? He, who was usually very sparing with stories about himself, is caught up in the momentum of happiness that the Lord gave him; this happiness underpinned his whole life. We get the impression that he is singing, *“I became aware of Christ’s existence, Christ’s life, Christ’s love...”* And he exults, *“it was vital in my life, it gave me “la joie de vivre”, the grace to live, a motivation to live.”* I never met Father Caffarel. I

⁵ Entretien réalisé en juillet 1978 par Claude Goure, cité par Jean ALLEMAND, *op.cit.*, p. 14-15.

⁶ Henri CAFFAREL, March 25, 1973 speech, Archives Équipes Notre-Dame, cited by Jean ALLEMAND, *op.cit.*, p. 15..



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

only know his voice through recordings. But I hear his voice in my ear and I believe I hear it communicating his faith, his love for God. This voice, that none of us can forget and that we will recognise in heaven.

How can the depth of his words not also move us? In revealing himself, Father Caffarel places us in front of a reality; a concrete and spiritual reality. We are in the presence of God who inhabits His servant and who draws us too towards Him. God is in him. These accounts of his vocation sound as they did on the first day. The young Caffarel was touched to the depths of his heart, there where his personality springs forth. The centre of himself; that is his relationship with God. *"I knew that I was loved and that I loved."* Later on, he would speak about the *"I-You"* that finds its source here. The centre of himself is not an *"I"* closed, but an *"I"* open to God. He is part of a *"dialogue,"* a constant dialogue with his Lord. His famous prayer, *"O You who make your home,"* explains his spiritual life and inspires ours.

An *"I"* open to God. These three words, *"open to God,"* need to be explained. In the September/December 1974 issue of *Cahiers sur l'oraison*, many witnesses gave impressive accounts of their encounter with the Lord in a piece entitled, *"They met God."* Father Caffarel notices all the common points between these encounters and also what is unique about them. But the question still remains, who is this encounter with? God? The Lord? Jesus Christ, the Saviour? Naming the person encountered is always done in a precise fashion and shows the specificity of the dialogue that follows. For the young Caffarel, it is totally clear whom he meets: Jesus Christ. He is clearly named. Why is it so? Later it will become obvious for two reasons. Marriage is the sign of the covenant between Christ and the Church and prayer is the moment where Christ prays in us. There we have two of Father Caffarel's great teachings.

Father Caffarel taught... Indeed, he recounted his vocation fifty years later with an incomparable freshness, but also with the retrospect of a master who must never forget to teach. Indeed, he explained his vocation not as an event that concerned only himself, but one that concerns us too. He said, *"I became aware of Christ's existence, Christ's life, Christ's love,"* but he taught that *"the relationship of love between Christ and man is what Christian life consists of."* Each individual vocation is incarnate in the common vocation of a Christian. Loving God, loving one's neighbour as oneself, this is how every Christian ought to live. This was apparent in a particular way in him, but it is also each one of our vocations too.

Father Caffarel concluded, *"henceforth between Him and I it would be for life. That was it."* The radical nature of giving. In this light, we are touched by Father Caffarel's words when he commented in *L'Anneau d'Or* on a passage from Paul Claudel's *L'Échange*, *"Nothing seems simpler than giving oneself, the day when we meet Jesus Christ for good. Up until then, I knew of Him because I had heard him spoken of, but here, He came out of the fog of history and stood before me. Someone, alive. Everything in me that was made for giving was awoken and hastened forward."*⁷ The radical nature of giving with joy and love.

The teaching that he gave in the midst of such an intimate declaration on his vocation had the effect of immediately announcing his mission. His mission was inseparable from his vocation. *"From that day onwards, I had one desire: to enter more closely into that intimacy with Christ and another desire to bring others to the same, because it was vital in my life (...). And equally, I could only wish that others too would have this encounter with the living Christ, this discovery that God is love."* This desire is the sign of the authenticity of his encounter with the Lord, for every time the Lord calls someone to Himself, He does so that they enter more closely into his intimacy, every time the Lord reorientates the person and sends them towards others. The Teams of Our Lady for couples, the Fraternité Notre-Dame de la Résurrection for widows, the weeks of prayer at Troussures, all these find their source here.

One more important nuance must be noted in this account, *"I could only wish that others too would have this encounter with the living Christ, this discovery that God is love."* This manner of speech describes very well an important aspect of Father Caffarel, *"I could only wish."* Simultaneously, there is the need to bear

⁷ Henri CAFFAREL, *L'Anneau d'Or*, n° 27-28, 1949, p. 193.



Henri Caffarel, prophète pour notre temps

Colloque International – 8 & 9 Décembre 2017

witness to his encounter with the Lord, *“Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!”* St Paul said (1 Cor 9:16). The need comes from God. But Father Caffarel goes further, *“I could only wish.”* He wished, but did not force. He respected everyone and all the testimonies confirm this aspect of Father Caffarel. He was not a guru overriding his troops. Instead he was simply a servant who wished to lead others to God, because this love of God was his life! For love of us, he desired that we meet the God of love.

Again, Father Caffarel was rather reserved and secretive about himself... Yes indeed! But it is right also to say that he handed over to us the most precious thing about himself: his love of God. Marie d’Amonville, who with her husband Louis, worked for many, many years with Father Caffarel said, *“He gave us God.”*

3. God alone is the Source of Life

The influence of this vocation of his teachings on marriage, widowhood and prayer ought to be alluded to here. And others will do so.

I however, would simply like to read you these lines that are so characteristic of the experience and teaching. God at the heart of all human life, in all its unfurling, in its duration, in its depth. He spoke of loneliness and came back to it often. Here he is answering someone who wrote to him,

*“Madame, you require of your husband something that he is completely unable to give you: the absolute. Absolute love, absolute happiness. (...) The finite cannot quench an infinite desire. There is no solution on the married level for human beings. Yet, it would be untrue to maintain that they are ill-fitted for happiness; simply they are ill-fitted for any less than infinite happiness. The passion for the absolute is simply incompatible with happinesses that are not God’s happiness. (...) So, ask God alone what God alone can give.”*⁸

Father Caffarel said elsewhere, *“Men and women are not wrong in asking the absolute of each other. If they are both united with God, each one will find in the other more than a reflection of divine love, that love itself.”*⁹ This is a magnificent teaching on Christian marriage. It is the source of happiness for many.

III. A Prophet

“A prophet for our times,” this is what Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger¹⁰ called him. He wanted thereby to show the role that Father Caffarel played in the flourishing of conjugal spirituality throughout the second half of the 20th century.

1. The Source of his Prophetism

The prophet in the Bible and in the Church is not someone who announces the future, but someone who discerns, in both events and people, what God wishes to bring to the surface in men’s lives. God’s prophets grasp and understand the orientations that God wants to give his people, the Church, the people of their time. In the great rise of Christian laity in the first half of the 20th century, the Lord called on Henri Caffarel to highlight the sacrament of marriage and in its continuity, widowhood. Father Caffarel is a prophet because he saw and perceived God’s will.

In order to understand Father Caffarel, we must not neglect the accounts he left us of his vocation and that we have tried to reflect upon, for it is from this experience of the encounter with Christ that Father Caffarel reflected and sought... It is through the love that the Lord put in his heart that he looked at the

⁸ Henri CAFFAREL, *Aux carrefours de l’amour*, Parole et Silence, Paris, 2005, p. 25-27.

⁹ Henri CAFFAREL, *Amour qui es-tu ?*, Éditions du Feu Nouveau, 1971, p. 124.

¹⁰ Cardinal Lustiger, Archbishop of Paris from 1981 to 2005.



Henri Caffarel, prophète pour notre temps

Colloque International – 8 & 9 Décembre 2017

lives of the men and women of his time. I can hear him in my head exclaiming on the Jacques Chancel programme *Radioscopie* (March 15th, 1973), “*Love, that is my substance! A being who does not love is dead, is a corpse! Because God is love, because man is love.*” Listen to how strong these words are! Faith in God, faith in man. Christ’s calling made and constructed him like that. Everything had its source in his vocation. He was the prophet of love.

Father Caffarel was loved by God and he loved Him in return. So, he understood those who love each other. As a prophet in the service of couples, widows and all those who sought to love, he discerned the path that God had mapped out for them. So those who loved identified with him, found in him a master, because love comes from God. There lies the fundamental unity of Father Caffarel’s life. He sought what God wanted for those who were entrusted to his ministry. The path to holiness is the path of love.

2. The Expression of his Prophetism

How did Father Caffarel show that he was a prophet? The answer is simple; he listened.

He listened and reflected upon what couples told him about the experience of their daily lives. There was no abstract research, but instead a listening to the experience of couples in whom God manifested His love. This listening was done in the light of Scripture, in the light of the Church’s faith. Similarly, he listened to widows who expressed their new experiences with the Lord and with their husbands.

Certainly, Father Caffarel had the necessary qualities to listen, but it is not enough to say that. He listened with the love that the Lord put in his heart, “*I knew that I was loved and that I loved.*” Father Caffarel received the particular grace to be able to guide couples, widows and people on retreat in Troussures on the path to holiness; the holiness of love. Father Caffarel became truly himself in this quest for holiness. He owed it all to his vocation, to the vocation that he described to us.

He listened and also watched. Witnesses said that Father Caffarel had a gaze that scrutinised the depths of their hearts. Nothing indiscreet, but a warm and respectful attention for the person in front of him. He seemed to be asking, “Lord what do you want for him, for her?” Father Caffarel’s gaze in the photos of him arrests us even today. He seems to scrutinise us and lift us towards God. As the Bordelaise St Paulinus of Nola said admirably at the beginning of the 5th century, “*Let us listen to what all the faithful say, because in every one of them the Spirit of God breathes. In whatever place it may be, and as weak as it might be, I will look out for its breathing.*”¹¹ In this quote, I see a magnificent description of Father Caffarel completely awakened in his faith and completely attentive to us.

3. The Truth of his Prophetism

This Colloquium that follows on from the first in 2010 is going to show us the pertinence of Father Caffarel’s action, the truth of his mission. Therefore, I do not need to be insistent. Simply, let me just tell a story. At Brasilia 2012 at the International Gathering of the Teams of Our Lady, I was sitting beside the man who was to become the Patriarch of Lisbon. We watched the huge crowd of Team members coming out of the conference centre. He said to me, “*The holiness of Father Caffarel is there. It is those couples!*” He was not saying that we were all saints! He was showing me the richness of the founder, the power of his message, the pertinence of the Movement’s structure, such as it is expressed in the Charter, whose 70th anniversary we are celebrating today. As Father Caffarel told Team members in 1987 in Chantilly, “(back in the beginning, in 1939,) *there was more than just a good idea [...] Providence and the Holy Spirit also had something to do with it.*”¹²

¹¹ Saint PAULIN de NOLE, *Les plus beaux textes sur le Saint-Esprit*, Paris, Éditions de la Colombe, 1957, p. 191.

¹² Henri CAFFAREL, Conférence aux Responsables Régionaux Européens, Chantilly, 3 mai 1987, Archives Equipes Notre-Dame.



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

Conclusion

Father Caffarel, a man of faith. The profound impression I had when preparing this talk and that I have when talking to you is that I am indeed talking to you about Father Caffarel, but above all I am talking about God, the principal character in everything. When I read Father Caffarel's writings, I was immediately before the mystery of God, before his love. I believe that therein lies a characteristic of his holiness.

In conclusion, let us bring ourselves before God and allow me to read you now one of Father Caffarel's prayers, entitled, *Seize me with your Two Hands*. It is one of the few prayers we have from him, along with *O You who make your home...*¹³

This prayer is very intimate and profoundly moving. As an epigraph, a citation from St Irenaeus of Lyon, "*For by the hands of the Father, that is by the Son and the Holy Spirit, man was made in the likeness of God.*"

I come before you God, my God, my Father.
Father of great majesty,
Father of infinite tenderness,
Seize me with Your two hands:
Your Son and Your Holy Spirit.
May your Son tie me tightly to Himself
and never loosen His embrace.
May your Holy Spirit fashion me
in the image of Jesus Christ, Your beloved child,
instill in me his filial tenderness with regard to You
and impatience to see Your glory.

As an earthly father leans over
to take his little boy
and lift him up
similarly, You, Holy Father, seize me with Your two hands
and leave on my forehead a kiss.

¹³ Henri CAFFAREL, *Dieu, ce nom le plus trahi*, Editions du Feu Nouveau, 1990, p. 183.