



The Thinking of Father Caffarel

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1. An Incarnated Thinking

Father Caffarel is a man of encounter. His intelligence is as great as his culture. But he always reflected, with thought coming from encounters which marked his life. One could say, that very often, Father Caffarel had great intuition about marriage, that he had the ability to gather couples around him. However, what happened was quite the contrary. It was not he who gathered the couples; it was the couples who came to find him in order that he would help them to follow the Lord. Later, it was the young widows who sought his support. Each time, he said: « *Let us search together.* » Father Caffarel had therefore thought and reflected, in response to such concrete requests, in the main part, to these realities which are part of all human life, these realities still largely unknown at the beginning of his ministry as priest.

I am going to say the same thing to you in other words. At the beginning of everything was, his vocation. « *It was in March of 1923. I was twenty years old. In an instant, Jesus became a person for me. Oh! Nothing extraordinary. But I knew that I was loved and that I loved. Between Him and me, this was for life. Everything became joy.* » At the beginning Father Caffarel encountered the Lord. All of his life is here in those few words. It was this that kept developing throughout his ministry, his immense desire to help others to encounter the Lord, to discover how much, in reality they are loved by God.

Let us put it differently: **he had a concrete intelligence.** He searched to understand humanly and spiritually people and things, in their depth. As someone said: « *He searched for the signs of the Holy Spirit in each person coming to see him.* » One word summing up all: « **incarnation.** » Father Caffarel looked for the will of God in reality, and in spreading it. It is characteristic of the prophet in the Bible. « *Prophet for our time* », this is the title that Cardinal Lustiger gave him, during a Mass celebrated on 27th September in the Church of Madeleine in Paris, just after his death.

2. Married Spirituality

Incarnation. This reality concerns married spirituality very well. Indeed, **the love of God, source of all, is incarnated in human love.** The love of God comes to blossom, to develop, in the love of man for woman and of woman for man. Thus, they are « *in the image and likeness of God* ». In this way Genesis speaks of marriage (1:27) St. Paul uses complementary language, that of the gift of self to the end: « *Husbands, love your wives as Christ loves the Church: and sacrificed himself for her* » (Eph. 5 : 25). At the heart of love, there is the Cross, the total gift of self to the other. To love, is to give oneself totally! The demand of love. However, Father Caffarel corrects what could be « a half truth »:



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« *To love, is it to give? » To love, is to breathe: breathe in and breathe out, to give and to receive. Love suffocates when this rhythm is not respected ».* Just like you need time to accept, to be able to receive, to depend on the other through love... God is at the centre of this relationship, He who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit: dependent on love. It is here that married spirituality finds its source. It then opens to others, to children and to the world.

In order to arrive at this spiritual maturity, it is necessary **to love solitude**: the companion of love, it permits each one to descend into silence in the depth of oneself. Father Caffarel remarked: « *One does not succeed in love as in business, in putting the soul in parenthesis. It is at the level of the interior being which must achieve communication and communion.* » There, in this solitude and this communion, each couple finds their own personality, unique and mysterious. And there, the couple offers themselves and gives themselves to the Lord and the Lord gives himself to the couple: there is « *a pact, an covenant, in the Biblical sense of the word, between Christ and the couple.* » And Father Caffarel concludes: « *In this way linked to the couple, present to the couple, Christ aspires to give thanks to his Father, to intercede with and through the couple* » (Monthly Letter of Equipes Notre-Dame, April 1968). Greatness of the sacrament of marriage, strength of married spirituality.

This spirituality of gift, giving-receiving, the priest understands and lives, he whose spirituality is that of love. His motto could be: « The joy of giving life ». He gives his life to God. **The sacraments of Holy Orders and Marriage are complementary**, they are « at the service of communion », They desire "the salvation of others" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1533). Love opens the world! The joy of spiritual counsellors in Equipes Notre-Dame.

3. The Mission of the couple

This presence of the Lord in the couple generates a mission for the world. The couple is witness of God for the world; therefore this is also their responsibility. In Rome, May 1970, Father Caffarel said: « *The first way for you to fulfil your mission, is always **to live your love more perfectly**, that will deploy all of its virtues, that will manifest fidelity, happiness and fruitfulness* ». Yes, but we are poor! Father Caffarel adds: « *It is necessary to return to the grace of Christ, saviour of the couple. Suddenly, your couple becomes the witness of God the saviour and not only of the creator God. Your couple gives witness to God in a more explicit fashion when it is the union of two searchers of God, according to the admirable expression in the psalms* » (Facing Atheism, Rome 1970).

The witness of the couple. Here I have a personal memory. One day, on the boulevard Saint-Germain in Paris, I saw coming towards me a couple I knew, married more than thirty years. Both of them came towards me, joyfully, holding hands. They had not seen me. I was overcome, seeing their love, I said to myself: « *God is present!* » Yes, where there is love and charity, God is present. I did not dare show myself. Father Caffarel said: « *I want to communicate to you my conviction that **a couple of « searchers for God »**, in a world which no longer believes in God, which no longer believes in love, is a « theophany », a manifestation of God, as happened to Moses when in the desert with the bush which burned but was not consumed* » (Facing Atheism, Rome 1970).



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It is still a powerful means of apostolate, precious to Father Caffarel, and deeply anchored in the life of Teams couples: **the endeavour of hospitality**. Listen to Pope Paul VI. He spoke to Teams couples (4th May 1970) : « *In our time, so hard for many, what a grace to be welcomed "in this little Church", in the words of Saint Jean Chrysostom, to enter into its tenderness, to discover its motherliness, to experience its mercy, so it is true that the Christian couple is « the smiling and sweet face of the Church." It is an irreplaceable apostolate which is yours to fulfil generously, an apostolate of the couple for whom the formation of engaged couples, help to young married couples, help to couples in difficulties is a privilege. »*

Prayer

It would not be right, in presenting the thoughts of Father Caffarel, only to mention married spirituality. For Father Caffarel, the Lord is at the centre of everything. Father Caffarel shows the path of prayer. Since 1966, hundreds of people (lay, religious, priests, bishops) have come close to him to learn how to pray at the House of Prayer at Troussures, sixty kilometres north of Paris. To learn, gradually, to come to silence, to learn to descend « **to the bottom of my heart** », to learn to live with the Lord in the solitude of the love of God for us. To learn to control our body and our breathing. To learn to offer ourselves completely to God so that He would come and make his home in us. To learn peace.

Today, when we read his writings on married spirituality, but also on prayer, we are always put in the presence of God, **he introduces us into the mystery of God**. Yes, we read his writings, and gentleness, **an** urge, a surge of love towards God seizes us. The knowledge of our faults does not crush us because a hope rises in us. At Troussures, Father Caffarel gave a text to read: « *Love me just as you are. I want the love of your poor heart; if, for you to love me, you wait to be perfect, you will never love me.* »

In an interview on Radio Canada, Father Caffarel gave a definition of prayer : « **it is this personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ introduced me into this personal relationship with the Father ; and the Holy Spirit is the great worker of all this activity.** » Later he said: « *It is a great truth to express and to repeat: Mankind is hungry and thirsty. They need to discover that they are loved because this love finds in them something loveable. Do they not often hear it said that there is nothing loveable in us? They do not even love themselves; the great discovery, this is it.* »

Conclusion

In the Church, one calls « charism », a gift of God to a person, a gift which is embodied in one or more institutions, for the good of all. **The charism, received by Father Caffarel, is that of married spirituality**: it has been embodied in *Équipes Notre-Dame* at the service of **the sacrament de marriage**, in the Fraternity *Notre-Dame de la Résurrection* for **the widowed** - some of the widowed take a vow not to remarry and offer their widowhood for the salvation of couples – and lastly the *Intercesseurs* – they pray at night **for couples**. At the centre of everything, prayer, prayer: God is love! Let us give thanks to God!

Father Paul-Dominique Marcovits, O.P.



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