



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

HENRI CAFFAREL A FOUNDER

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In 1936, after several years of service in Action Catholique, Father Caffarel asked his bishop for a “break” and he got it. He intended to recharge his batteries spiritually and to prepare for a vocation that was more spiritually oriented. He thus wrote to Monsignor Ghika¹, *“The Cardinal asked me to leave the position I was in in order to take on another. I expressed the desire to take a year’s leave. I would really have liked him to allow me to do so. It would be, it seemed to me, so useful to have a year of prayer and calm meditation after five years of hyper-active ministry...”*² Father Caffarel was driven by a deep conviction, one that Vatican II would remind us of twenty years later: all men are called to holiness. “All”, meaning the laity too, who seemed to him to have been rather neglected in that regard. This is how he expressed this conviction in 1942, in a text addressed to Cardinal Suhard, archbishop of Paris *“Holiness, that which, up until now, seemed to call for a withdrawal from the world, asserts more and more its rightful place within the world. For Christians, the fire in their hearts is not the temporal but the spiritual; it is a question of seizing it back in order for it to enter into that great current that ought to transport the whole of creation towards God. [...] There lies the heart of the problem: will we have lay saints (saints: meaning people who have completely given themselves to Christ, dwelling in His charity, driven by His Spirit), workers, peasants, heads of industry who will be saints, politicians who will be saints, artists who will be saints.”*³

Let us also add: couples who will be saints. Because Father Caffarel ended up being confronted with the actuality of couples, so completely different and separate, that led him to become a founder. I have heard various versions from Father Caffarel himself concerning the beginnings of this adventure. Who had the initiative? The couples or their counsellor? Difficult to decide. And this is the reason why I remained rather imprecise in the book I dedicated to him.⁴ That was until that day in the year 2000 when I had access to the unpublished correspondence of two wives from the first group, Rozenn de Montjamont and Madeleine d’Heilly; correspondence that was piously kept by one of their daughters. Indubitably, it was the couples’ initiative. This is what a long letter from the former to the latter teaches us. This letter is referred to on January 27, 1939, in the post-script of a previous letter, *“I will write to you with my ideas on our circle of couples from Saint-Servan.”* This must have followed immediately and is made up of several pages. Here is the essence of this letter. Who will lead the group? *“In theory, it seems to me that the leader in this intention, that both you and us would like to undertake, ought to be a couple. That is certain, but with an appreciation that the husbands are terribly busy in general. I think that in our particular case, we ought to*

¹ Blessed Monseigneur Ghika, a Romanian by birth served in France but later returned to Romania in 1939. In 1952, he was beaten and tortured by the Communist regime. He died in 1954 due to the treatment he had suffered.

² LE PERE CAFFAREL. *Des Equipes Notre-Dame à la Maison de prière. 1903-1996*, Actes du colloque (Paris, Collège des Bernardins, 3-4 décembre 2010), Éditions Lethielleux, 2011, p.104.

³ Henri CAFFAREL, « Signes des temps, signe de grâce », *L’Anneau d’Or*, novembre-décembre 1949, p. 411-416.

⁴ Jean ALLEMAND, *Henri Caffarel. Un homme saisi par Dieu*, Equipes Notre-Dame, 1997, p. 38.



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be able to work on it together, Peter and I, albeit rather unequally, with respect to the time dedicated to it or else with respect to the energy to be given..." Thus, the initiative indeed came from the couples. Indeed, they are talked of as young couples, but in fact were already well settled in their lives at this date. The Montjamont already had 4 children (they would have 6) and the d'Heilly 2 (they would have 5).

The priest, who would accompany the group, remained to be found. The two women spontaneously thought of the person who was already spiritually guiding them, Father Caffarel. Hopeful, knowing his worth. But also with some reticence, since they knew he had a strong personality. And this led to a description of Father Caffarel that is worth listening to. *"There's another thing to say to you,"* wrote Rozenn de Montjamont, *"before talking about all this in front of Father C(affarel). Peter, who likes him practically as much as I do, finds the concept of a chaplain threatening, or rather that he needs to be clearly put in the picture. [...] It would be best, I think for it to be a lay affair, amongst Christian couples, with the support, the help, and the moderation of a priest? Rather than a little church run by a priest. What do you think?"* She came back to this further along. *"I feel that I shocked you when I appeared to fear that the chaplain would take up too much space. In addition to our own guide's reaction, [...] we had in mind a conversation with Father Huet, Father C(affarel)'s friend and guide, who respected him enormously and yet said to us that he could not be chaplain of anything without being excessively overwhelming because of his great personality, and because of this, he would hamper the lay people's participation amongst themselves."* And when she had described at length how the meetings could be, she concluded, *"We, as leaders of a group like this, must take the following into consideration. Because you and I prefer the words (meaning the thoughts) of Father C(affarel) above all our speeches or exchanges, we cannot not take into account the others' feelings. Therefore, from the very start, we must avoid the meetings becoming a respectful hearing of Father's lectures, followed by a vague and timid exchange and then prayer..."* The fear of domination did not hold up when faced with the desire to have such a guide. And so, they approached Father Caffarel. We know his reaction, *"Let us seek together."* That was on February 25th, 1939, during the group's first meeting (the word team was not yet in use).

Therefore, it seems clear that Father Caffarel responded to a calling. He already knew the problems faced by the couples that he accompanied spiritually. He entered the process that was suggested to him to gather them together and to seek collectively. Incidentally, he recalled these beginnings when, at the gathering of the young movement in Rome, 1959, he recounted the *"Vocation and road map of the Teams of Our Lady"*: *"Do I need to remind you that I did not receive God's wish for our Movement through a revelation. I tried to discover it gradually, to decipher it in events day by day, in the same way as you, parents, try to figure out your child's vocation by studying their evolution with attentive love. Since that day, already so long ago when, as a young priest, I received the visit of a young couple who wished to be helped in their path towards God, until today before your immense assembly, I have endeavoured to understand the needs and aspirations of Christian couples and to perceive in them the movements of grace, in order to help them to correspond to them joyfully and generously. I will not hide from you the fact that I have known difficult moments: what are the desires and aspirations that must be fulfilled because they lead to progress and spiritual growth? And what are those that must be halted because they lead to mediocrity and sloppiness."*⁵

And concerning the beginnings of the adventure, he continued, *"Going back up the river to the source, you will find four young couples, full of their brand-new love. Because they were confirmed*

⁵ Henri CAFFAREL, *Les Equipes Notre-Dame. Essor et mission des couples chrétiens*, Equipes Notre-Dame, 1988, p. 59.



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Christians, they did not believe in living their love on the periphery of their faith. For lack of precise ideas on Christian marriage doctrine, a very keen intuition filled them with hope and led them to a priest. 'This human love is our wealth and our joy. It is not possible that God does not believe it to be something that is very beautiful and very great; we want to get to be informed about it; you must reveal it to us.' [...] I was not so very far ahead of them. At the very least, I was convinced that, since love came from God, and since marriage was a divine institution, the divine idea of love and of marriage ought to be infinitely more exalting than anything that these young men and women could imagine. My answer to them was, 'Let us seek together. Let us unite and go off and discover.'⁶ This quest, modest in the beginning, gradually grew. Other groups were created, bringing along their own experiences. A structure and organisation were put in place, always with great pragmatism. And after eight years the Movement, strictly speaking, was accomplished with the promulgation of the Charter (See my talk at the 2010 Colloquium).

I have lingered over the birth of the Teams of Our Lady because it was exemplary. But a similar process can be seen in the emergence of the Movements for widows or for that of the Centre for Marriage Preparation: a need is felt, a recourse is made to Father Caffarel in order to deal with it, limited testing or trial that progressively increases, becomes organised, is given rules and a name. We can see this very well concerning the widows. Young war widows came in 1941-1942 to ask Father Caffarel about the meaning of their widowhood, because he had already helped them in their marriage. Their quest resulted in the foundation of the Fraternité Notre-Dame de la Résurrection (Fraternity of Our Lady of the Resurrection), in 1943, from which arose Groupement spirituel des Veuves (Spiritual Groups for Widows) in 1946, that then became Espérance et Vie (Hope & Life).⁷

Let me highlight another aspect of our founder. This idea of testing, - he thought about it and sought to pass on its results. This was the role played by publications. You have just been told about *L'Anneau d'Or* that had an international audience. But there are also bulletins specific to each Movement: the *Lettre mensuelle des Equipes Notre-Dame* (Monthly Letter of the Teams of Our Lady) and *Offertoire* (Offertory) that became *Message aux Veuves* (Message to Widows). And in 1956, the *Cahiers sur l'Oraison* (Prayer books). Only those who have run a magazine, with its regular publication deadline, can understand the amount of work that went into putting together so many. Because Father Caffarel, who controlled everything, wrote in each publication, either an editorial or a letter on prayer. His aim was not only to be understood, but even more to be lively and stimulating. What he taught he meant to be put into practice. As someone who worked with him, I can testify to the care and thought he put into each piece of writing. He used to say to me, "For an article (or a homely): an idea, an image, a feeling. What you say over and above that is lost." Or again, "Write as if you were writing for 16 year olds," (a few years later, it was "as if you were writing for 15 year olds"). He revealed his 3-stage method to me, "First seek the ideas, then organise them, finally write." When he had written an editorial or a letter on prayer, he would bring it to me with these instructions, "My text is three pages long, I want three pages of criticism: what is not right, why it is not right, what you suggest instead." His permanent concern was undoubtedly to instruct, but above all to touch and move hearts to turn them towards love.

It is important to add that, for Father Caffarel, a foundation was never truly completed. He tended and looked after it like a father with his children. He wrote to the Teams of Our Lady in 1960, "Would you be surprised if I told you that I am on the lookout for everything that can tell me about the vitality of our

⁶ Henri CAFFAREL, *Les Equipes Notre-Dame. Essor et mission des couples chrétiens*, p. 60.

⁷ Jean ALLEMAND, *Henri Caffarel. Un homme saisi par Dieu*, p. 63-77.



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*Teams, since I fear that which might jeopardise it. When faced with its rapid growth, I am currently feeling like a father or mother before their teenager who has grown too fast: in order for growth not to be detrimental to sturdiness, nourishment needs to be carefully chosen and administered.”*⁸ And so, each great gathering was an opportunity for the founder to review the situation and to renew the Movement’s momentum. This was particularly the case in Rome in 1970. In addition to the great pastoral speech given by Pope Paul VI, Father Caffarel himself spoke of *“The Teams of Our Lady confronted with atheism.”* And as a concrete conclusion to his speech (always the practical man), he recommended new “obligations”: private prayer, reading of the Word of God and ascetic practise. At that time in France, we were coming out of the 1968 crisis and he said, *“One can only overcome such difficulties by doing more, by redoubling our efforts.”* Private prayer and the Word of God were therefore introduced into the Charter as supplementary “obligations” (now they are called Endeavours) for couples. And after the pilgrimage, a special edition of the *Lettre des Equipes Notre-Dame* (Letter of the Teams of Our Lady) was dedicated to redefining the Movement in order to prepare a new commitment by the members. A text from this letter will serve as a conclusion, *“The term ‘movement’ indicates dynamism and continuous adaptation. The term ‘spirituality’ underlines the priority of breath and spirit in the organisation and its methods and specifies clearly the aim: “spiritual” life, that is, Christian life inasmuch as it is animated by the Holy Spirit and leads towards holiness.”*⁹

Bringing as many people as possible to strive towards holiness, that is the ambition of all of Father Caffarel’s foundations.

⁸ Henri CAFFAREL, *Les Equipes Notre-Dame. Essor et mission des couples chrétiens*, p.144.

⁹ Jean ALLEMAND, *Henri Caffarel. Un homme saisi par Dieu*, p. 63-77.