

Father Caffarel
Presentation to the Transatlantic Super Region
John and Elaine Cogavin - Swanwick June 2007.

In November 2005, we had the pleasure of visiting the House of Prayer run by Fr. Caffarel in Toussures in France from the time he left the responsibility in Teams in 1973 until his death in Sept. 1996.

The house in this small village, north of Paris, is striking for its prayerful environment, its rural setting and its sense of peace. However, what remains strongest in our minds is the simple headstone on the grave of Fr. Caffarel which simply gives his name and dates of birth, ordination and death and the quotation: “*Come follow Me.*”

His request was to be buried in the remote graveyard looking out over the rolling hills in the quiet countryside.

Since then and in the months that followed when we were helping in the preparation of the process for the Cause for his Beatification, we grew to know and to love this quiet and prayerful man who lived through most of the last century 1903 – 1996. Today we want to share with you something of our understanding of Fr. Henri Caffarel.

In this short session we will try and uncover together something of this man, as prophet, and as person while understanding the challenges he set before us and the solutions he offered through his guidance of Equipes Notre-Dame and through his suggestions to Church and to society.

THE PROPHET

What we would really like to share with you today is our absolute conviction that this man, Fr. Henri Caffarel, was truly a prophet and the reasons why we believe this to be so. In the dictionary are two definitions for the word ‘Prophet’ - both seem to describe him well.

1. “A person who speaks by Divine inspiration or as the interpreter through which the Will of God is expressed.”
2. “A person gifted with profound moral insight and exceptional powers of expression.”

In all our study of his works we have found everything he said to be as relevant today as it was when he wrote them.

The prophetic nature of Fr. Caffarel’s work started with that first encounter with those 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.)

This was the start of a journey developing an understanding of married spirituality and evangelising the sacrament of marriage with this group of couples.

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)

Pope John Paul II 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 II Rome 2003.)

This term ‘married spirituality’ was used by Fr. Caffarel and those early Team couples from the very beginning, even though it was almost 20 years later during Vatican II that the Church began to use such a term - a term which is common terminology today.

For thirty-five years he served Teams of Our Lady – overseeing the growth and development of the Movement across all continents and through this growth guided the spiritual development of the Movement whose aim he described as:

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

In 1965 Pope Paul VI described Equipes Notre-Dame as “the smiling face of the Church.” and in 1976 he gave a reminder to all of us 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.”

He was described by the Cardinal Archbishop of Paris in 1996 as:

“One of the great figures given by God to his Church in the course of this century.” (Sept 1996.)

THE PERSON

To understand any prophet and to make sense of the challenges he set before us, it is good to have some appreciation of the person. In our research, certain prominent characteristics of Father Caffarel became apparent. He strikes us as a visionary, a listener with great inclusiveness, somebody who is competent, honest and outspoken in his search for the truth – somebody who is persistent in his determination to see his vision fulfilled. Above all we see a prayerful priest answering God’s call.

As Visionary

With this new phrase ‘married spirituality’ he shows an understanding of the importance and need for development of married love as a path to holiness. After the war much

growth of new groups had occurred throughout all of France. However, at this same time, he observed some who were missing the true charism, some others who were becoming just social groups, who were losing the purpose which had brought them together.

“Had the wonderful enthusiasm which had animated the first groups been already exhausted?”

He thought then 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.”*

This rule became the Charter of the Teams of Our Lady presented to the Movement on December 8th 1947 and changed the name from ‘Caffarel Groups’ to ‘Equipes Notre-Dame’ - ‘Teams of Our Lady’. The Charter sets out in the first part the objectives we must strive after and in it’s second part the means of working towards these objectives – the methods and the endeavours.

Listener

Throughout his 35 years of service, he always worked with groups of couples in the search for the truth of married spirituality:

- With the Leading Team he developed the Charter in 1947.
- In 1970 with the then Leading Team, they prepared and presented additional endeavours:
 - > to spend time each day in quiet contemplative prayer
 - .> and the daily study of Holy Scripture.

In presenting these he said:

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

(Rome 1970.)

His openness to the Holy Spirit in guiding Teams had its roots in his response to those first young couples in 1938.

“Let us seek together; let us join together and set off on a journey of discovery.”

Competant and Honest.

His whole ministry, his service to the Teams Movement, to the Troussures House of Prayer, and now the process for his beatification, which was accepted in April 2006, are real testimonies to his competence, to his honesty and to his outspokenness. His many documents, editorials and conferences are further testimonies.

He was always held in high regard by Cardinals, and Bishops throughout the world and was listened to and acted upon by Pope John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul II and strong echoes of his vision are paralleled in Pope Benedict XVI’s first encyclical “Deus Caritas Est.”

Persistent and determined

His most outspoken comments were in pursuit of the ideals of married spirituality. He persistently challenged the Institutional Church of which we will speak more of later. However, his most determined comments were directed at ourselves, the members of

Teams, exhorting us to move forward in our own area of expertise and in the fulfilment of the essential aims of the Movement.

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 the 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)

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)

The Man of Prayer

In 1970 with the Leading Team, he introduced the endeavour of personal contemplative prayer with these words:

“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)

THE CHALLENGES

To understand the challenges which Fr. Caffarel encountered in those early days, we need as he would say: *“To return to the source.”* which finds a Europe at the brink of war but

the challenges they tried to respond to were similar to those that face us today or that we have experienced in our lives.

This was a period of uncertainty, of fear and of concern for the future caused mainly by:

- **Materialism** which had started to dominate society and its philosophy was anti-Christian, anti-marriage, anti-family. Already this was being challenged by the young.

Reflecting in 1970 on the changes of the 60's, he said:

“It is also true that the revolution of young people which has sprung up in the past few years and in numerous countries, indicates the pressing need of young people to escape from materialism which is suffocating them.”

- **Atheism** was then thought to be the philosophic thinking of more than one third of the population of the world. Today it continues to grow in parallel with agnosticism. He prophesied that *“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.”*
- **Lethargy of Christians** who seemed to find little happiness in their faith, who show no enthusiasm to talk about God. The image of God shown by Christians in their way of living and subsequently in their speech was hardly attractive. He quotes from Gaudem et Spes this harsh sentence: *“In the origin and growth of Atheism, Christianity may have played a part which is far from unimportant.”* This false image of God was so distant from the personal relationship with Jesus which Fr. Caffarel presented in his own life and which he hoped for, for every Christian in particular for every Christian couple.
- **Separation** The Church saw spirituality as the speciality of the priests and religious – the celibate. Opportunities for involvement by the laity were offered to either men or women. There was often separation at Mass and other religious practices, such as retreats and confraternities. Speaking to Leaders of the Movement in Chantilly, France in 1987, he humorously spoke of organising the first Teams retreat. When he asked for facilities from a Jesuit House, they said fine but no women were allowed in a Jesuit House. He then made the same request to the Cenacle Sisters, who replied ‘Yes’ but no men would be allowed.
- **Marriage Practice** As with religious and social practice, the role of husband and wife were different and separate. Family and marriage were being degraded in almost every country. Sexual relations were confined to pro-creation and still carried the stigma of ‘soul-good’ – ‘body bad’ thinking from many centuries .

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.”

SOME SOLUTIONS

Teams of Our Lady

Through his encounter with those first young couples in 1938, he embraced these challenges. He worked tirelessly for the next 35 years with so many couples in defining, experiencing, documenting, evangelising, refining and correcting the charism of our Movement and its framework and methods. This pedagogy has benefited each of us, as person and as couple in our journey to God – helping to awaken in one another the sacred.

The charism of Teams of Our Lady is as a Movement of married spirituality. It is considered as a gift from God to the Church and to the world.

The pedagogy then, as today throughout the world remains the same. It is based on two pillars:

- One is the Team meeting where we meet together, share, pray and support one another, discuss what we have studied and deepen our relationship with one another and with God.
- The other pillar is the set of endeavours we take on during the month which, when we truly try to incorporate them into our lives, will strengthen our prayer life, deepen our couple relationship and increase our knowledge on the topic we choose to study as a Team.

These two pillars have created for us a learning environment to support ‘Married Spirituality’.

We should look at our Movement and see how it benefits us and how it can benefit other couples to develop their Christian married spirituality.

Our Team meetings create a learning environment of awareness, of dialogue, of meeting with Jesus through our encounter with other team couples and spiritual counsellors.

Our pooling and our study topic educate us on the worldly challenges and the art of relationship as couple.

Jesus is present throughout our meal and time together but in a very special way as we pray His **Holy Scripture**.

When we share on our **Endeavours** we are helping each other in a truly Christian way, to find new ways to deepen and develop as person, as couple and in our relationship with God.

The sit-down gives us an opportunity, as couple in the presence of the Holy Spirit:

- To affirm each other as persons and as couple
- To review our progress in the light of Gospel values
- To map out our future plans as couple, and as family.

We believe that our practice of personal prayer is our encounter with Jesus.

We believe that through the Endeavours combined with our study of Scripture, family and couple prayer, that we are stepping together ever so gently to a closer relationship with our Living God.

Father Caffarel’s great wish for all of us was that and I 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).

THE CHURCH

In the early 1960's Fr. Caffarel presented to the future Fathers of Vatican II 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.

Pope Benedict in his first encyclical ‘Deus Caritas Est’ – ‘God is Love’ presents a new vision for our sacrament of love. He contradicts the old thinking which separated the two loves of ‘eros’ and ‘agape’ often suppressing ‘eros’ in favour of ‘agape’. On the contrary, he asserts that eros is ever reaching out towards its fulfilment in agape, stating:
“Eros is thus supremely ennobled, yet at the same time it is so purified as to become one with agape.”
(Benedict XVI ‘Deus Caritas Est’)

Perhaps in this Encyclical we have something of a response to another 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.”

The Second Vatican Council may not have included all of Father Caffarel’s suggestions. However, one of the great expressions of the Council was the invitation to us the laity is to take responsibility for our own faith development and for the development of the Church.

Question 1:

How can we respond to and make real Father Caffarel’s vision of 1959 speaking to Teams in Rome?

“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?”

Question 2:

With this spirit, how can we today respond to the needs of Church and society in the area that we are the experts in – married spirituality?

Question 3:

How can our learned experience be brought to the benefit of young couples preparing for marriage and to priests and Bishops within the Church?

A DIEU

Vatican II speaks of the ‘Domestic Church’. We have so much to thank those early couples and Fr. Caffarel and the Holy Spirit for bringing our first Team together and allowing this same model to flourish all over the world today.

It is probably not surprising but definitely worth reflecting on what Fr. Caffarel spoke of as he stepped away as Spiritual Counsellor to the Movement in 1973. 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)

John and Elaine Cogavin
International Leading Team
Equipes Notre-Dame

