



Bill Witt

Like much of the northerly part of the country, we had an exceptionally cold winter. The last days of January were record-breakers: two mornings in a row it was about -32 F. The day in between, with a high in the afternoon of -16 F, the Post Office decided it was too cold to deliver mail. After a very wet fall, we had dense snow cover well into March, which prolonged the cold. And now that the snow north of us is finally melting, with no place to go, the mighty Mississippi in Dubuque is at Major Flood stage, with what we hear will be the last snowmelt crest of the spring.

But the greater concern locally is not the water in the river, but the water in the ground. It's still too wet for the farmers to get into the fields, and Iowans are getting a bit anxious. Our state has the highest percentage of land in cultivation of all 50 states, and



Sr Madeleine

the National Weather Service maps show us at present as also the most waterlogged! However, no doubt the crops will soon be planted, if a bit late. And with Easter also being rather late this year, we are hoping for spring flowers to celebrate the Risen Lord.

We close with news of another new novice! On April 7 Laura Beverly received the Cistercian habit, and a new name as well: Sr Marie Madeleine – which of course is French for “Mary Magdalene.” Once again we ask your prayers for our new novice, whose patron was “the apostle to the apostles,” bringing them news of the Resurrection of Christ. Be sure of our prayers for you and your loved ones!

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OUR LADY
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Our Lady of Atlas monastery, Tibhirine, Algeria

We usually keep our newsletter to news about our monastery, but this time we also want to share with you a wonderful event for our whole Order, and indeed for the Church: on December 8, seven of our Trappist brothers were beatified, along with twelve other priests or religious, all of whom were martyred during the Algerian Civil War.

Our Lady of the Atlas monastery was founded in Algeria in 1934 from monasteries in France, which had a strong colonial presence in the country. By 1938 the community had established itself in the village of Tibhirine, near the Atlas mountains. The monks developed a great rapport with their Muslim neighbors and played a significant role in the local economy; and under the leadership of Dom Christian, who was elected prior in 1984, the monastery became a center for peaceful interreligious dialogue.

In the 1990's a civil war broke out in Algeria between Islamist forces which had won a general election, and the previous government which refused to

transfer its powers to these victors. Late in 1993 the rebel forces declared war on foreigners in Algeria, and on December 14 they murdered twelve Croats working at a construction site two miles from the monastery – men who often worshipped with the brothers. Nine days later, late on Christmas Eve, the same group invaded the monastery, looking for money and for medical assistance.

Dom Christian, who had extensive knowledge of the Koran, was able to persuade the group to leave for the time being; but as you can imagine, the two incidents shook the monks badly. After a community discussion they voted to leave promptly for a safer location. But then Bishop Henri Teissier of Algiers, head of the Algerian Church, visited them. He spoke to the brothers about the effect a hasty departure would have, both on the remaining Christian community in Algeria, and also on their Muslim neighbors in the village, who had no option to leave, no way out of a dangerous situation that was traumatic for many of them.



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"Christian asked his brothers to reflect on what their bishop had said, and to decide according to what gave them the most peace. Each was to meet privately with him that evening to tell him the decision before reconvening...the next morning. As each brother talked to Christian after Compline, they all had a similar response: 'I am not at peace with the decision to leave.'" [quote from *The Monks of Tibhirine*]

Over the next two years eleven priests and religious sisters in Algeria were slain. The Atlas community struggled with fears and with doubts about the right course of action, but always came to a decision to remain. In January of 1996 Dom Armand Veilleux, the Procurator General of our Order, told the brothers

during a visit: "You have come to these decisions through prayer and dialogue...This discernment process and the amount of risk involved seem to have deeply united you to each other. You are a united community in spite of your considerable personal differences... and your ties with the local population and local church are closer than ever."

Two months later, during the night of March 26-27, armed men entered the monastery and abducted seven of the nine brothers present (they did not discover two of them). We all lived in suspense about their fate for nearly two months, when on May 21 the heads of our brothers were found. To this day there is some controversy over whether it was the rebels or the

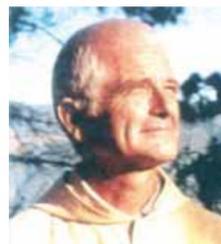
government which kidnapped them, and – what may be a separate question – who killed them, especially as their bodies have never been recovered.

But regardless of who perpetrated the violence, the crucial matter is that, as true martyrs, they faithfully bore witness to Christ and to his love for all. We are blessed to have some writings of the monks, mostly from the pen of Dom Christian and from Fr Christophe, a poet by nature. Especially precious to us is the "testament" written by Dom Christian in the wake of the Christmas Eve invasion and sent to his family in France, to be opened in the event of his death – one of the most remarkable texts ever written by a martyr facing his own death (see below).

Our personal connections with the brothers were small; a couple of our sisters who had attended our General Chapters in the 1990's had at least met Dom Christian in passing. A fonder memory for us comes from the summer of 1993, the year of the great Midwestern flood. Our monastery is so high above the Mississippi that, short of Armageddon, we are in no danger from the river. But as the terrible flooding became a world-wide news item, we received messages of concern from many of our houses – including a message from Dom Christian, assuring us of his community's prayers for our well-being. We trust that he and all our brothers continue to remember us before the throne of Jesus!



Blessed Christophe



Blessed Célestin



Blessed Paul

Testament of Dom Christian de Chergé

(opened on Pentecost Sunday, May 26, 1996)

Facing a GOODBYE....

If it should happen one day - and it could be today - that I become a victim of the terrorism which now seems ready to engulf all the foreigners living in Algeria, I would like my community, my Church and my family to remember that my life was GIVEN to God and to this country. I ask them to accept the fact that the One Master of all life was not a stranger to this brutal departure.

I would ask them to pray for me:

for how could I be found worthy of such an offering?

I ask them to associate this death with so many other equally violent ones

which are forgotten through indifference or anonymity.

My life has no more value than any other.

Nor any less value.

In any case, it has not the innocence of childhood.

I have lived long enough to know that I am an accomplice in the evil

which seems to prevail so terribly in the world,

even in the evil which might blindly strike me down.

I should like, when the time comes, to have a moment of spiritual clarity

which would allow me to beg forgiveness of God

and of my fellow human beings,

and at the same time forgive with all my heart the one who would strike me down.

I could not desire such a death.

It seems to me important to state this.

I do not see, in fact, how I could rejoice

if the people I love were indiscriminately accused of my murder.

It would be too high a price to pay

for what will perhaps be called, the "grace of martyrdom"

to owe it to an Algerian, whoever he might be,

especially if he says he is acting in fidelity to what he believes to be Islam.



Blessed Christian

I am aware of the scorn which can be heaped on the Algerians indiscriminately.

I am also aware of the caricatures of Islam which a certain Islamism fosters.

It is too easy to soothe one's conscience

by identifying this religious way with the fundamentalist ideology of its extremists.

For me, Algeria and Islam are something different: it is a body and a soul.

I have proclaimed this often enough, I think, in the light of what I have received from it.

I so often find there that true strand of the Gospel

which I learned at my mother's knee, my very first Church,

precisely in Algeria, and already inspired with respect for Muslim believers.

Obviously, my death will appear to confirm

those who hastily judged me naïve or idealistic:

"Let him tell us now what he thinks of his ideals!"

But these persons should know that finally my most avid curiosity will be set free.

This is what I shall be able to do, God willing:

immerse my gaze in that of the Father

to contemplate with him His children of Islam

just as He sees them, all shining with the glory of Christ,

the fruit of His Passion, filled with the Gift of the Spirit

whose secret joy will always be to establish communion

and restore the likeness, playing with the differences.

For this life lost, totally mine and totally theirs,

I thank God, who seems to have willed it entirely

for the sake of that JOY in everything and in spite of everything.

In this THANK YOU, which is said for everything in my life from now on,

I certainly include you, friends of yesterday and today,

and you, my friends of this place,

along with my mother and father, my sisters and brothers and their families,

You are the hundredfold granted as was promised!

And also you, my last-minute friend, who will not have known what you were doing:

Yes, I want this THANK YOU and this GOODBYE to be a "GOD-BLESS" for you, too,

because in God's face I see yours.

May we meet again as happy thieves in Paradise, if it please God, the Father of us both.

AMEN ! INCHALLAH !

Christian +

Algiers, 1st December 1993

Tibhirine, 1st January 1994



Blessed Luc



Blessed Bruno



Blessed Michel

If you would like to learn more about our brothers of Atlas, we recommend:

Kiser, John W. *The Monks of Tibhirine: Faith, Love and Terror in Algeria*. St Martin's Press, 2002. This book is so good that it has been translated into German and even French, although there is plenty of other material available in French.

Of Gods and Men. A French-language feature film with English subtitles, it has generally been very well received by our order (that's saying a lot!). *Des hommes et des dieux*. 2010. Directed by Xavier Beauvois. Won Grand Prix at 2010 Cannes Film Festival, and other awards. Quite powerful!



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Our refectory at Christmas.



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To move on to our own monastery: this fall we had our easiest "candy season" ever, thanks to a good deal of work done earlier in the year. It's always been our goal to finish production by Advent, but we don't always manage – for example, in 2017 when we were featured on the Today Show at the end of November, we had to gear up again in December. Our shipping department, already in high gear by early November, goes into overdrive from Thanksgiving to mid-December, when we send out hundreds of packages each day. This year, by December 5 all hands were available to help ship all that candy out.

With production over shortly after Advent started, we were better able to enjoy the wonderful Advent liturgy. It is such a beautiful season, and we are so blessed not to be bombarded by pre-Christmas commercialism. Our Christmas season truly does not start until Vespers on December 24! And then it lasts for a couple of delightful weeks, when we rest from our labors and rejoice in the Incarnation of our God.

A special gift to us as we celebrated the coming of the Savior of the whole world was the presence of three sisters from around the globe. Sr Ana Laura of Hinojo (our Trappist sisters in Argentina – we also have a community of brothers there), came to our monastery in September for a visit, and stayed until early January. Our two other visitors are students at the Divine Word College in nearby Epworth, Iowa. Sr Tran from Vietnam is a Cistercian like ourselves, but from the "other" branch of Cistercians – the non-Trappist branch. Her home monastery is huge – over 100 sisters! Sr Tran had visited us before, but this time she brought a new sister to us, Sr Hilde, from a Camaldolese monastery in Tanzania. The Camaldolese, like us Cistercians, were founded in the 11th century and live a contemplative life according to the Rule of St Benedict. It is rare for us to have the joy of such an international presence – representing not only three countries, but three continents!