

DIALOGUE

Meeting our Muslim brothers and sisters

A sharp-eyed lady in our retreat group peered through the gloom of the vast Abbey church in Galicia and asked me why seven candles, grouped together on the high altar, were lit.

Anthony Weaver is organising a retreat of reconciliation in Viviers, France this autumn. He reports on the background to this pilgrimage.

It was May 1996 and our group had travelled north from Santiago de Compostela to visit the Trappist Monastery of Sobrado de los Monjes. I could not answer her question: the monks had abandoned the cavernous and freezing old church

for a modern community chapel, so the candles had not been lit for a Mass, or any monastic office. I asked Santiago, one of the monks, and he explained that the community had just received news from the office of the Abbot General in Rome that seven Trappist monks had been murdered at Tibhirine, Algeria. This was the first time I heard of the monks of Tibhirine.

Fast forward to January 2018 and the news from Rome is that the seven monks are about to be beatified as part of a group of nineteen priests and religious killed by Islamists in Algeria in the 1990's. Their martyrdom had never been in doubt for those who saw the French film 'Of Gods and Men', released in 2010 and winner of the Grand Prix at Cannes that year. Directed by Xavier Beauvois, the film focuses on the dilemma facing the monks: should they risk their lives by remaining at Tibhirine in solidarity with their Muslim neighbours and the tiny beleaguered Christian community? Or should they leave and seek refuge in a safer location?

On the night of the kidnapping there were nine monks in the monastery and the kidnappers, thinking there were only seven, left without Fathers Amedee and Jean-Pierre. The Prior, Father Christian de Cherge, had written his

spiritual testament some time before, contemplating his fate as a victim of the terrorism '*which now seems ready to encompass all the foreigners living in Algeria*', making it clear that '*I could not desire such a death*', but desiring to '*immerse my gaze in that of the Father, to contemplate with him his children of Islam just as he sees them*' and ending by forgiving his murderer, so that '*we find each other, happy "good thieves" in Paradise, if it pleases God, the Father of us both.*'

After the massacre of their confreres, the two monks who had escaped regrouped in Morocco where Fr. Jean-Pierre at the age of 87 continues to follow the full monastic round at Notre Dame de l'Atlas, at Midelt, south of Fez. For students of Islam, it is fascinating to contrast the rule of King Mohammed VI in Morocco, with its tradition of Sufi mysticism and relative religious freedom, with the situation in Saudi Arabia, where the King (Guardian of the Two Mosques) adheres to strict Wahabbi teaching.

All the monks at Tibhirine had known what lay in store if they remained, having experienced an armed invasion of the monastery on Christmas Eve 1993. Their lives had been hanging by a thread, as had that of the great French aristocrat and mystic, Blessed Charles de Foucauld, who had chosen to live among the Tuareg people at Tamanrasset, and was murdered in 1916.

Just like de Foucauld, the monks had never seen their role as that of missionaries aiming to convert Muslims to Christianity. Their vision was of a servant church, exemplifying St Paul's insight that Christ's power shines forth most powerfully in weakness (2 Corinthians 12: 10).

May 2017 saw the episcopal consecration in Worth Abbey Church, Sussex, of a former British Army officer, John MacWilliam, who had joined the Missionaries of Africa (formerly known as the White Fathers). As Bishop of Laghouat (Arabic for Oases), his diocese is approximately six times the size of Great Britain, covering most of inland Algeria. There are about four and a half million inhabitants, of whom only a few hundred are Christian (mainly



Photo: ©Nouvelle Cité

The funeral of the seven monks attended by Muslims and Christians from the local community

expatriate workers and migrants). Like Blessed Charles de Foucauld who lived and was martyred in this diocese and like the Trappist monks of Tibhirine, Bishop John does not see his ministry as based on making converts. Conversions to Christianity are extremely rare in Morocco, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt. In Algeria they are almost unknown.

In his homily at the consecration at Worth, Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald, himself a British member of the Missionaries of Africa, reminded Bishop John that he would be charged with caring for *'not only those who come to work in the oilfields, but also African students or migrants crossing the Sahara dreaming of a better life'*.

Bishop John will indeed have the desert as his Cathedral and will be piloting the barque of the local church on a sea of sand, or, perhaps, crossing dunes.

Twenty-two years after our retreat in Galicia when we first heard of the martyrdom of the monks, a retreat has been organised in the south of France for later this year which will celebrate Christian-Muslim encounter in the context of Blessed Charles de Foucauld and the monks: Christian, Christophe, Luc, Michel, Bruno, Celestin and Paul.

Our venue in October will be the beautiful small town of Viviers, on the banks of the Rhone and home to the smallest cathedral in France. Our retreat-giver, Dom

Martin McGee, a Benedictine monk of Worth Abbey, is an expert on Algeria, a longstanding friend of Bishop John MacWilliam and has written both *'Dialogue of the Heart: Christian-Muslim Stories of Encounter'* (2015), and *'Christian Martyrs for a Muslim People'* (2008).

Our accommodation will be in the large and well-appointed Diocesan Retreat House, formerly the Grand Seminaire where Blessed Charles de Foucauld was ordained priest on Sunday 9th June 1901. Our ten-day retreat holiday will include not only talks and discussions, but excursions to the Trappist Abbey of Aiguebelle, mother house of some of the monks of Tibhirine, and to centres of Christian-Muslim dialogue in both Lyon and Marseille (Viviers is exactly halfway between these cities). France is home to seven million Muslims. We hope and pray that our retreat in Viviers later this year will be a blessed time when we respond to the call to meet our Muslim neighbours as sons and daughters of our father, Abraham. ■

Further details of the October retreat at:
www.retreats-beyonddover.com

For the Last Testament of Fr.Christian de Cherge in English:
www.firstthings.com/article/1996/08/last-testament

First published by The Tablet in January 2018