

Background to the Story of the Monks of Tiberine by Fr Patrick McInerney

In the 1st century North Africa was largely Christian. There were over 700 bishops scattered across the area. The most famous was Augustine of Hippo, later recognized as a Doctor of the Church and one of the most important foundational figures in Western Christianity and in Western civilization.

Christian life in Algeria dwindled after the Arab conquest in the seventh century and became virtually extinct in the twelfth century when, in retaliation for the Spanish *reconquista*, the Islamic dynasty imposed conversion on the few remaining Christians. The Spaniards established brief enclaves along the coast in the sixteenth century until the Ottoman Empire extended its sway over most of North Africa.

In 1830 the French invaded Algiers. After the colonial conquest thousands from France, Spain, Italy and Malta settled in Algeria, restoring a foreign Christian presence, but under restriction not to proselytize the locals. In 1954 the National Liberation Front (FLN) started agitating against the colonial powers. The bloody conflict cost 50,000 to 150,000 lives. After the 1962 plebiscite voted overwhelmingly for independence, over a million people, French citizens and the Algerian army personnel who had fought on their side, uprooted and settled in France. Only a small remnant of Christians remained working in the oil and gas fields.

In the decades after independence, Algerian governments became increasingly socialist, authoritarian and heavily reliant on the army to retain power and privilege. Rapid industrialisation, urbanization, population increase and political repression led to increasing economic disparity and social unrest. Finally, political agitation ended one party rule and opened the way for a variety of political parties. In 1991 the *Islamic Salvation Front* (FIS) easily won the first round of the first multi-party elections, but then the army intervened, cancelled the second round of elections, deposed the president and banned all religious political parties. This triggered the ten-year long Algerian Civil War.

The major antagonists were the military and a coalition of Islamist* insurgents under the title of Armed Islamic Group (GIA – from the French *Groupe Islamique Armé*), while the innocent civilian population was caught in the violent crossfire. Estimates range from 100,000 to 200,000 lives lost over the following ten years.

In October 1993 the GIA issued a decree ordering all foreigners to leave Tunisia or face execution. The monks of Tiberine chose to stay, observing strict neutrality, respecting both “the brothers of the plains” (the military) and “the brothers of the mountains” (the Islamist insurgents). Their decision was a deliberate act of solidarity with their Muslim neighbours with whom they had forged links of friendship and who suffered terribly in the middle of the violence. It was also an expression of solidarity with the tiny, beleaguered Christian community.

Dom Christian de Chergé, the prior of Tiberine, was fully aware of the risks. In December 1993, around the expiry date of the GIA ultimatum, he began composing a testament explaining his decision. He completed it on 1 January 1994 and sent it to his brother in France to be opened only on his death. He wrote that his life was given to God and to Algeria; that if he is killed he joins the many others who died in anonymity; that he is not worthy of martyrdom; that he is neither superior to others nor innocent of evil; and he asks forgiveness for himself and for his killers. It is a very moving testament.

On the night of 26th/27th of March the seven monks at Tiberine were kidnapped by Islamist insurgents. Fifty-six days later on the 21st of May they were killed, to the horror and dismay of Christians and Muslims alike, as testified by the many messages of condolences sent to the leaders of the Church. To this day the identity of the killers and the manner of the monks’ deaths remains unknown. What is known, though, is the dedication and love of the monks of Tiberine for the people among whom they lived and whom they served: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (Jn 15:13). This is love of God and love of neighbour. This is the way shown by Jesus Christ. It is the path of all the prophets. It is the way to peace in our world. May the witness of Dom Christian and the monks, priests and sisters and the many innocent victims of our day challenge us to bring about God’s designs in our world.