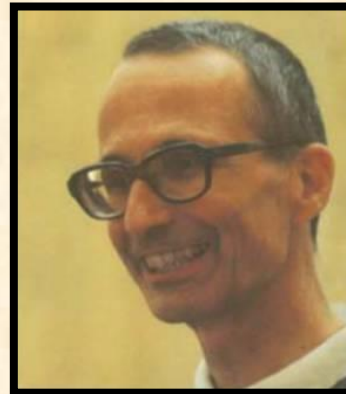


Testament of Dom Christian de Chergé OCSO

This testament was composed in Algiers during December 1993 and completed on 1 January 1994. It was opened on Pentecost Sunday 1996 shortly after Dom Christian and others of his Trappist community were murdered in Algeria.



If the day comes, and it could be today, that I am a victim of the terrorism that seems to be engulfing all foreigners living in Algeria, I would like my community, my Church, and my family to remember that I have dedicated my life to God and Algeria.

That they accept that the Lord of all life was not a stranger to this savage kind of departure; that they may pray for me, wondering how I found myself worthy of such a sacrifice; that they link in their memory this death of mine with all the other deaths equally violent but forgotten in their anonymity.

My life is not worth more than any other—not less, not more. Nor am I an innocent child. I have lived long enough to know that I, too, am an accomplice of the evil that seems to prevail in the world around, even that which might lash out blindly at me. If the moment comes, I would hope to have the presence of mind, and the time, to ask for God's pardon and for that of my fellowman, and, at the same time, to pardon in all sincerity him who would attack me.

I would not welcome such a death. It is important for me to say this. I do not see how I could rejoice when this people whom I love will be accused, indiscriminately, of my death. The price is too high, this so-called grace of the martyr, if I owe it to an Algerian who kills me in the name of what he thinks is Islam.

I know the contempt that some people have for Algerians as a whole. I also know the caricatures of Islam that a certain (Islamist) ideology promotes. It is too easy for such people to dismiss, in good conscience, this religion as something hateful by associating it with violent extremists. For me, Algeria and Islam are quite different from the commonly held opinion. They are body and soul. I have said enough, I believe, about all the good things I have received here, finding so often the meaning of the Gospels running like some gold thread through my life, and which began first at my mother's knee, my very first church, here in Algeria, where I learned respect for the Muslims.

Obviously, my death will justify the opinion of all those who dismissed me as naïve or idealistic: "*Let him tell us what he thinks now.*" But such people should know my death will satisfy my most burning curiosity. At last, I will be able—if God pleases—to see the children of Islam as he sees them, illuminated in the glory of Christ, sharing in the gift of God's Passion and of the Spirit, whose secret joy will always be to bring forth our common humanity amidst our differences.

I give thanks to God for this life, completely mine yet completely theirs, too, to God, who wanted it for joy against, and in spite of, all odds. In this *Thank You*—which says everything about my life—I include you, my friends past and present, and those friends who will be here at the side of my mother and father, of my sisters and brothers—thank you a thousandfold.

And to you, too, my friend of the last moment, who will not know what you are doing. Yes, for you, too, I wish this thank-you, this "*A-Dieu*", whose image is in you also, that we may meet in heaven, like happy thieves, if it pleases God, our common Father. Amen! *Insha Allah!*

The transcript of the Testament is from John W Kiser, *The Monks of Tibhirine: Faith, Love, and Terror in Algeria* (New York: St Martin's Griffin, 2003), 244-46.

Reflection on Dom Christian's "Testament"

This is a profoundly moving testament. The author's name is "Christian", but the document is profoundly Christian in many ways other than the mere happenstance of the author's name. There are allusions to Christian biblical texts and to Christian theological doctrines. The document expresses the ideal Christian attitude to Islam and to Muslims. It is an eloquent expression of the spirituality that motivates Christians to engage in interreligious dialogue with Muslims and with believers from other religions. It is a witness of the Christian faith that is willing to bear the cost of human solidarity, to the point of death, and does so gladly and thankfully, even joyfully!

Dom Christian expresses his desire and curiosity to see "the children of Islam" as God sees them, "illuminated in the glory of Christ, sharing in the gift of God's Passion and of the Spirit." This is obviously a Christian expression. It is not how Muslims see themselves. It is not how many Christians see Muslims. Nor is it about converting Muslims to Christianity. But it is how Christian theology acknowledges the presence and activity of God's Word and God's Spirit in Islam and in all other religions and cultures. Christians confess that this dynamism is of God; it is what unites us most profoundly beyond our differing doctrines and rituals; it will only be fully manifest in God's good time; and it will appear to all as astonishingly new, beyond the confined expectations of each of our traditions.

Dom Christian is also profoundly aware of the false caricatures of Islam, the fanatical and extremist versions that lead to hatred and violence. Yet he is also appreciative of the genuine truths and values he found in the lives of Muslims, which he readily links to the meaning of the Gospels. Again, Muslims would not identify the linkage in this way, but it is a Christian expectation to find traces or elements of God's grace and presence in other religions and cultures which are related to Christ "in a way known to God" (cf GS, 22).

Dom Christian does not pretend to be worthy of martyrdom. Nor does he claim innocence. He readily confesses his own complicity in evil—as does any adult who is in any way aware of the ambiguities and waywardness of the human heart. In a world where people and leaders all too often avoid responsibility and pretend to be blameless, such frank honesty is truly refreshing. It points to the only judgement that really matters, not our own, nor that of others, but the mercy of an all-forgiving God.

It is especially here that Dom Christian's testimony is most Christian. He expresses the hope that he would have the presence of mind to ask pardon for himself and for others and "to pardon in all sincerity him who would attack me." He concludes by addressing his killer without rancour, referring to him astonishingly as "my friend of the final moment". He asserts that the killer "will not know what [he] is doing", blesses him "*adieu*" (until we meet in God's presence), and looks forward to meeting again as "happy thieves" in heaven. All these sentiments resonate with texts and images from Christ's crucifixion. They echo Jesus' words of pardon from the cross—"Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Lk 23:34)—and Jesus' promise to the penitent thief—"Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Lk 23:43).

Finally, Dom Christian's testimony is imbued with a spirit of thankfulness. There is thanks for the life that Christian was given by God; there is thanks for the life that Christian in turn gave to God and to Algeria; there is thanks for that life that was enriched by parents, brothers, sisters, family and friends, Christian and Muslim alike; and there is the final thank you even to the "friend of the final moment". The meaning of "Eucharist" is thanksgiving—thanks to God for the salvation given in Christ, thanks to Christ who gave his life for us, thanks for the Spirit poured out on all creation—and it is giving our lives in turn back to God in and with Christ. So Christian's life was not taken from him, but given by him, willingly, freely, joyfully, his death fulfilling and completing the Eucharist that was part of the rhythm of his daily life in the monastery.

May many Christians take up Dom Christian's challenge and follow the Eucharistic imperative, giving our lives to the cause of peace, justice and reconciliation with Muslims and people of all faiths and none.

Patrick J McInerney