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The Gift of the Monks of Tibhirine

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John Kiser, *The Monks of Tibhirine: Faith, Love and Terror in Algeria* (St. Martin's Griffin, 2003).

Stretching from the Mediterranean Sea to the heart of the Sahara Desert and capped by the Atlas Mountains, Algeria is an immense land full of contrasts and harsh beauty. It is a land that has known many masters, from the Numidians, Phoenicians, and Romans in antiquity, to Islamic caliphates in the Early Middle Ages, and in the modern age, the Ottomans and the French. Memorable spiritual reflections have been prompted by its varied, foreboding landscapes. Saint Augustine of Hippo contemplated the nature of the Trinity on its shoreline. The hermit Blessed Charles de Foucauld lived among the Tuareg in the Sahara. Meanwhile in Algiers, Albert Camus despaired of the absurdity of modern life. It is a land in which man has dwelled deeply upon his relationship with God and his fellow man.

In *The Monks of Tibhirine: Faith, Love, and Terror in Algeria*, John W. Kiser recounts the story of seven Trappist monks who came to Algeria from France to devote themselves to the triad of prayer, study, and work in a monastery in the foothills of the Atlas Mountains. This book served as the primary source for Xavier Beauvois' beautiful 2010 film, *Of Gods and Men*. The question so often asked of these monks by friends and family was *why*? Why spend their lives in a monastery in a predominantly Muslim nation with a miniscule Christian population where evangelization was forbidden? To begin to answer this question and unfold the mission of these monks, Kiser provides the reader with a detailed account of the deep rancor and misunderstanding inherent to French-Algerian relations.

France's invasion and subsequent settlement of Algeria in the nineteenth century was a messy business. Outbreaks of violence between newly-arrived French settlers and Algerians were frequent and brutal. As Kiser elaborates, part of the issue was theological. The devoutly Muslim Algerians were confused and disheartened by the lack of prayerfulness amongst the rough, pioneering French colonists (so-called *Pieds-Noirs*). The Qur'an describes Christians as a

people of prayer: “The nearest to the faithful are those who say ‘We are Christians.’ That is because there are priests and monks among them and because they are free of pride” (5:82). Understandably, heavy-handed French colonialism was a shock. And yet, at the same time, several Trappist monastic communities were founded throughout the country. These monasteries, most notably, Notre-Dame de l’Atlas in Tibhirine (founded in 1938) became known as places of friendship between Muslims and Christians. Cardinal Duval of Algiers poignantly described the essential role played by monks as the “lungs of the Church in Algeria” providing “spiritual oxygen” to Christians and Muslims alike.

In recounting the story of the monks of Tihbirine, Kiser’s narrative is centrally focused upon the abbot of the monastery, Christian de Cherge. Born into an aristocratic military family (his father was a general and his mother a descendent of the Marquis de Lafayette), Christian was described by his devout mother as unique among her children, showing a deep piety at a young age. Exceptionally bright and well-natured, Christian was in seminary when his studies were halted by the 27-month military service obligation required of all Frenchmen. It was an assignment that changed the course of his life.

In the summer of 1959, Lieutenant Christian de Cherge arrived in Algeria to serve in the French army during the war of Algerian independence. Like many Frenchmen before him, he was struck by the beauty and immensity of the landscape, but more importantly by the cordiality, hospitality, and sense of the divine he witnessed among the locals. He developed a deep friendship with a local policeman, Mohammed, with whom he spent hours walking the rocky landscape and discussing the nature of God. On one of these walks, they were confronted by soldiers from the Algerian army. Mohammed protected Christian and insisted that his friend was a friend of Muslims. In the end, they were allowed to finish their walk. However, the next day Mohammed was murdered by soldiers for his kindness, leaving behind his wife and ten children. Christian was profoundly moved by Mohammed’s generosity of spirit and his sacrifice.

Upon returning to France, Christian continued his studies and was ordained a priest in 1964, followed by a first assignment at Sacre-Coeur in Montmartre. However, in 1969, he responded to the call of the monastic life and entered the eight-hundred-year-old abbey of Notre Dame d’Aiguebelle in the Rhône Valley. Two years later he returned as a Trappist monk to the country he had left some ten years earlier as a French solider. In the years since he had last lived in Algeria, both the Church and the country had experienced profound change: *Gaudium et spes* embraced the universality of the Church and an openness to ecumenical outreach, and the independent Algeria of the 1960s diligently promoted religious tolerance. As Kiser explains, it was a time of hope and heightened expectations. At Tibhirine, Christian found a renewed peace that had escaped him in France. He wrote to a friend, “I have arrived in the Atlas Mountains surrounded by a population that is poor, but smiling, proud, and without bitterness. They are believers and respectful of all religious people, provided that what is in the back room corresponds with what is in the display window.”

The monastery of the Notre-Dame de l’Atlas in Tibhirine served as a spiritual oasis for the people of Algeria. Christian ensured that Muslims were welcome to come to this tranquil setting to pray and go on retreat. Ecumenical *ribats*, or dialogues of understanding, were regularly held between Christian and various Muslim elders. His brother monks, all originally from France, came to Tihbirine for the opportunity to serve God in simplicity. One of the brothers, Luc, was a physician who worked tirelessly to meet the many needs of the rural community. In addition to praying the seven Daily Offices, the brothers worked the land to maintain their vegetarian diet, cultivated lavender, and, most famously, produced over 800 pounds of pure dark honey each season (“Trappist gold”). As Kiser describes, the production of

honey had a special resonance for Christian: “Bee colonies reminded him of monks. Like a good monk, good honey, he would pun, was *sine cera*—without wax. Sincere. Pure.”

It was a fairly idyllic existence, but that started to change with the Islamic socialist revolution in the fall of 1976. All Catholic schools were quickly nationalized by the government which caused many clergy to return to France. For the Christian communities who remained, nationalization offered, in the words of Cardinal Duval, a chance to love gratuitously; to love without expecting anything in return. In the coming years, living out this love would become increasingly difficult as clergy were assassinated and religious shrines were destroyed. Yet the monks persevered.

The monastery’s position became increasingly perilous following the October Revolution in 1988 and the onset of the Algerian Civil War in 1991; a conflict which pitted the Algerian government against various Islamic rebel groups. By late 1993, the GIA (Armed Islamic Group) formally announced that all foreigners had thirty days to leave the country. Soon after, foreigners of various nationalities were killed throughout the country. Authorities in Algeria and France encouraged the monks to flee to safety. The local governor met with Christian to encourage him to allow a police presence in the monastery in order to provide protection. Christian steadfastly refused this offer: he would not accept the presence of weapons on monastery grounds. Tellingly, he did not want to compromise the monastery’s position in dealing evenly with the “brothers of the mountain” (rebels) or “brothers of the plain” (army). At this time, he started to reflect upon the works of Etty Hillesum—a young Jewish mystic killed at Auschwitz.

Kiser’s description of Christmas Eve in 1993 is harrowing. As the monks prepared for Midnight Mass, armed Islamic rebels entered the monastery demanding money, medicine, and the services of Luc, the physician. Christian heroically met with the rebels outside, explained the holiness of the night, and was able to keep danger at bay. However, it was now clear that the civil war, which eventually cost 100,000 lives, had reached Tibhirine. The Bishop of Algiers visited the monastery to discuss the situation with the brothers. Christian allowed each brother to consider whether he wanted to leave. All of them decided to stay: leaving would represent a cruel abandonment of the neighbors for whom they cared dearly. As one villager said, “If you go away, you will rob us of your hope, and we’ll lose ours.” In 1994, the situation worsened as religious leaders, journalists, and civilians were being murdered throughout the country.

And yet, the monastery maintained a peaceful détente with the army and rebel groups. Letters from the brothers to family in France show not only the clear understanding of the mortal danger they faced, but also of their deep faith and love for humanity. As Brother Paul wrote, “How far does one go to save his skin without running the risk of losing his soul? What will remain of the Church in Algeria in a few more months? Little, I fear. Yet, I believe the Good News is spreading; the seed is germinating.” Christian wrote insightfully on the five pillars of behavior (patience, poverty, presence, prayer, and forgiveness) that must be practiced daily to have peace in one’s life. Kiser describes how, in the face of impending danger, the monks exhibited a serenity through their connection to and patience in the sufferings of Christ.

In the spring of 1996, seven of the monks of Tibhirine were kidnapped by the GIA and held as part of a proposed hostage exchange. Some two months later in May 1996, they were found dead. For the first time since the death of Pope John Paul I in 1978, church bells rang across France. In Algeria too, the monks were mourned by Christians and Muslims alike. In the following decades, there have been conflicting reports on whether the GIA or the army were ultimately responsible for their deaths. Yet perhaps, in a way, this lack of clarity is fitting. In

their uncompromising love of their fellow man, the monks of Tibhirine underwent a true martyrdom, relevant to all of humanity. As the contemporary world continues to be roiled in religious conflict, their lesson and sacrifice are timeless. Theirs was a love, like the “Trappist Gold” honey that came from their hives: pure and sincere. “Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friend.”

The seven monks of Tibhirine were beatified on December 8, 2018.

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