



EDITORIAL

This is the fiftieth issue of *Bridges*! Over the past twelve years we have featured many news, views and values. We are confident that these have contributed to building better relations between Christians and Muslims. We look forward to continuing to serve all our readers in the coming months and years.

The last few months have seen dramatic events. On the 11th of November 2010, Asia Bibi, a Christian woman, was condemned to death under Pakistan's draconian and much-abused blasphemy laws. There were local and international appeals to save her life, including one from Pope Benedict XVI. The Governor of the Punjab, Salman Taseer, supported her, but was gunned down on the 4th of January 2011 by one of his own security guards. While the murderer was hailed by a few as a hero, religious leaders led protest marches in favour of the law, some refusing to conduct the funeral rights, thereby condoning the murder.

On the 17th of December in Tunisia, Mohammed Al Bouazizi immolated himself in protest against economic deprivations. His death on the 4th of January sparked demonstrations against the social and political conditions in that country. These escalated rapidly and 10 days later President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's 23-year regime was finished.

In imitation of Bouazizi, there were several attempted self-immolations in Egypt in mid-January. On the 25th of January, inspired by the success of the Tunisian revolution, many Egyptians took to the streets protesting against poverty, unemployment, corruption and autocratic rule in Egypt. The demonstrations escalated into nation-wide unrest. Some violence ensued in which several hundred were killed and many more injured. This only made the demonstrators more resolute in their determination for change and more and more rallied to their cause. Finally, on the 11th of February President Hosni Mubarak stepped down after 30 years in power.

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Similar protest demonstrations have since flared up in Yemen, Jordan, Syria, Iran, Bahrain, Libya, Morocco and other Middle-Eastern and North African countries.

It is too early to say what the final outcome of all these unfolding events will be. We hope and pray that the legitimate aspirations of all the people are met; that the dignity and rights of all people are upheld; that justice will prevail; that the regimes which survive the challenge will respond positively to serve the best interests of their people; that violence and repression will stop; and that the new governments being constituted will form truly democratic institutions that will serve the common good of all the citizens.

A notable feature of the Egyptian revolution was that Christians and Muslims participated together. Although Christians had been targeted in bombings in January, the following week many Muslims joined

them as "human shields" against the violence and the extremists. In the pro-democracy demonstrations they stood and protested side-by-side. We hope and pray that this interreligious solidarity will continue as the Egyptian leaders and people face the many challenges of creating a new political order.

This fiftieth "Golden" issue of *Bridges* features the award-winning film "*Of Gods and Men*", a story from Algeria in the 1990's. During the protracted and bloody civil war between violent insurgents and the military regime, more than 200,000 people were killed. The French monks of Tibherine refused to take sides in the conflict but chose to live in solidarity with the suffering Muslim people. This decision cost them their lives. The witness of these monks embodies the ideal Christian attitude to Islam and Muslims. We hope that promoting their story will inspire many other Christians to follow their example of love and service.

Patrick J McInerney, Editor

Affinity “Noah’s Ark” Cruise

On 13 December 2010, at the invitation of Affinity Intercultural Foundation, **Fr Patrick McInerney** and **Fr Brian Vale** joined a boatload of guests from different faith traditions on a Sydney Harbour Cruise. The occasion was to celebrate two recent Islamic religious feasts, °**Eid ul-Adha** (the Feast of sacrifice – commemorating Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son) and °**Ashura** (the Tenth Day of the month of Muharram – which our hosts informed us was also the occasion of a special meal on the ark, celebrated in Turkish Muslim tradition as “Noah’s Pudding”).

To sharpen the focus on the traditions of Abraham and Noah, Affinity Intercultural Foundation chose the theme of “*Prophets, Nations and Communities – Meet, Greet and Celebrate*”. Besides enjoying a delicious meal, the guests were entertained and inspired by short speeches by guests from different religions which highlighted our faith traditions’ commonalities as well as some of our differences.

In his brief presentation **Fr Patrick McInerney** emphasized that the ship we were on was a metaphor for the planet - that we share one world together so we must learn to get along with each other.

DVD on the Baptism of Jesus

On 18 December **Fr Patrick McInerney** and **Fr Reg Howard** from the Columban Mission Institute attended the screening of a new DVD, *The Baptism of Jesus Christ: Uncovering Bethany Beyond the Jordan*. This documentary presents research into locating where Jesus Christ was baptized. The evening was hosted by Al Ghazzali Centre, Lakemba, Sydney. Iman Afroz Ali, the founder of the Centre, and Fr Herman Roborgh SJ were the respondents for a lively discussion.

Cross Cultural Summer School

Fr Brian Vale spent most of January 2011 helping to coordinate a course at Baulkham Hills, Sydney, for Christians preparing to enter cross cultural ministry either in Australia or overseas. The course is organized by the Josephites and the Columbans. There were 14 participants from many different cultures, including some recently arrived in Australia from diverse countries such as Indonesia, Nigeria, Kenya, India and Fiji. The group dynamics were enriched by the variety of cultures participating. The daily inputs from resident staff and guest lecturers included topics such as Intercultural Sensitivity, Culture, Mission and Personal Formation. **Fr Patrick McInerney** gave a lecture on Interreligious Relations.

Introducing Islam Course

From 19-21 January **Fr Patrick McInerney** taught the first three days of an extensive course, *Introducing Islam*, at the Catholic Institute of Sydney. Fifteen people enrolled, including university students, teachers, social workers and concerned citizens. A weekend of lectures and presentations in May will complete the course.

Online Course on Islam

During December and January **Fr Patrick McInerney** spent many hours researching and preparing material and resources for an online course. The advantage of this medium is that people anywhere who have access to the internet can enroll. The course is entitled **Islam: Religion, History and Culture**. As advertised in the previous issue of *Bridges*, this course is being offered in the first semester of 2011 through the Broken Bay Institute and accredited through the University of Newcastle.

ITEMS OF INTEREST

From Benedict XVI's Letter to Iran's President

“Peace is, above all, a gift from God, which is sought in prayer, but it is also the result of the efforts of people of good will. In this perspective, believers of every religion have a special responsibility and can play a decisive role, cooperating in common initiatives. Interreligious and intercultural dialogue is a fundamental path to peace.”

For full details see:

<http://www.zenit.org/article-30925?l=english>

[The complaint is often made that Muslim leaders do not speak out condemning violence. Hence, the next item is all the more important. It reports the *hajj* sermon of the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, from the most sacred place and one of the most solemn moments in Muslim devotion. The sermon was reported widely in newspapers and Youtube clips throughout the Arab world. Editor]

Saudi Grand Mufti's *Hajj* Sermon Condemns Fanaticism and Violence

Muqtedar Khan, Associate Professor of Islam and Global Affairs at the University of Delaware, wrote:

It is while explaining intellectual security that the mufti called on Muslim communities to guard against deviancy, especially extremism and fanaticism. He warned that recent advancements in media and technology have led to the spread of dangerous ideologies and cyber terrorism. He called on Muslim teachers, imams, scholars, think tanks and professors to spread the true message of Islam and combat the spread of extremism.

For the full article see:

<http://www.commongroundnews.org/article.php?id=28852&lan=en&sid=1&sp=0&isNew=1>

From Benedict XVI's Post-Synodal Exhortation, *Verbum Domini*, The Word of the Lord.

On Christianity: "The Christian faith is not a 'religion of the book': Christianity is the 'religion of the word of God,' not of a 'written and mute word, but of the incarnate and living Word'." (No. 7)

On inspiration and truth: "Sacred Scripture is the word of God set down in writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. In this way one recognizes the full importance of the human author who wrote the inspired texts and, at the same time, God himself as the true author." (No. 19)

For more details see:

<http://www.zenit.org/article-30934?l=english>

[The significance of these papal statements is that, following the Quran, Muslims refer to Christians as "People of the Book." In doing so they honour us as possessors of revealed scripture. However, while this honorific title accords with Islamic teaching, it is not how we Christians see ourselves. The issues at stake are different understandings of revelation, inspiration and scripture in Islam and Christianity. For Muslims the final, complete and definitive revelation from God is the Holy Quran. For Christians, the full and complete revelation of God is the incarnate Word, the person of Jesus Christ, to which the Bible (the written word) gives witness. Editor]

For the full text of the Exhortation see:

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20100930_verbum-domini_en.html

Pakistani Christian Woman Sentenced to Death

A Pakistani woman sentenced to death in November last year for blasphemy has not been released from prison as some reports have claimed, despite an international outcry that included a specific plea on her behalf from the Pope. Asia Bibi was charged a year ago for allegedly blaspheming the Prophet Mohammed in a conflict with fellow farm workers. One report said that she was first insulted as "impure" (because not Islamic), then forced to defend her Christian faith in the face of pressure from the Muslim labourers. The Governor of the Punjab who supported her was gunned down on the 4th of January 2011. Human rights groups have long decried Pakistan's blasphemy laws as a means by which people take advantage of religious minorities. There are precedents of those accused of blasphemy in Pakistan being killed by vigilantes.

For more details and related articles see:

<http://www.zenit.org/article-31035?l=english>

<http://www.zenit.org/article-31075?l=english>

<http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=11449&page=0>

<http://www.thetablet.co.uk/article/15733>

Muslim Solidarity with Egyptian Christians

Sister Susan Connelly RSJ had an excellent letter published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* after the Coptic Christmas Mass when Egypt's Muslims served as "human shields" to protect the Christians from violence. They used slogans such as "We either live together, or we die together" and "This is not about us and them". She wrote:

"There were reports of appeals for calm by both Muslim and Christian leaders after the New Year's Day bomb attack on the Coptic Christian church.

What wasn't reported in the Australian media was the presence of thousands of Muslims at Coptic Christmas Eve Masses on January 6 and at candlelight vigils around the country, the action of ordinary Egyptian Muslims in solidarity with their beleaguered Christian fellow citizens. Millions of Egyptians proclaimed their religious tolerance and desire for unity by inserting a combined crescent and cross onto their Facebook profiles.

The manipulation of religious differences and the cultivation of victimhood for political ends are ancient social tools but remain effective. It is indeed regrettable that nations with relatively free media, like Australia, continue to fall into, and feed, these traps. Balanced reporting helps to deny extremists and fundamentalists the opportunity to set the agenda."

<http://www.smh.com.au/national/letters/time-to-address-pitiful-state-of-islands-dingoes-20110109-19jsp.html>

Faith, Peace and the Nobel

On 10 December the former Bishop of Oslo Gunnar Stålsett, who served for 14 years as a member of the five-person Nobel Peace Prize Committee, was asked: "The Nobel Peace Prize will be awarded in Oslo today. Many recent Nobel Peace laureates speak about their religious inspiration. Yet religion is often associated with war. How do you reconcile these two faces of religion?" He replied:

"Religion indeed has a double face: one that looks to peace and reconciliation, the other to enmity, even hatred and conflict. This is a well documented historic fact, and it applies to all major religions. Fundamentalism and fanaticism, especially, mar the face of religions. Even in our time, fear of modernity and loss of identity lie at the root of many appeals to "holy war." The two faces of religion cannot be harmonized. A choice has to be made, a choice for life, not for death, a choice for love, not for hatred, a choice for compassion not for conflict."

For more details see:

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/katherine-marshall/faith-and-the-nobel-a-con_b_793404.html

"Of Gods and Men" ("*Des hommes et des dieux*") A film by Xavier Beauvois, starring Lambert Wilson and Michael Lonsdale

One of the finest religious films, and one of the best Catholic films, in years.

The subject is the Trappist community of Mt Atlas, Algeria, in the 1990s. Living their monastic life amongst the local people and ministering to them, especially with medical services, they were viewed more and more with suspicion, especially because they were French expatriates, by government troops who were becoming more active against the increasing terrorist attacks, and by the terrorists themselves. Seven of them were killed in the latter part of May, 1996.

While the film expertly builds up the background of post-colonial Algeria, corrupt government, extreme Islamists, the role of the military, the violence perpetrated by both sides, the centre of the film is the life and preparation for death of the monks.

Filmed in Morocco, the film is both beautiful and austere in its landscapes and in the interiors of the monastery – and in the interior lives of the monks and their commitment to God and to their order.

The director, Xavier Beauvois, shows an instinct for depicting the detail of monastic life with sensitivity and a strong awareness of what it means. The actors look, move, speak and act as if they were authentic monks. Lambert Wilson shows the complexity of a man elected to be superior who has a tendency to make decisions himself but is willing to be guided in discernment by the whole community. Veteran Michael Lonsdale is the ageing doctor who shows practical wisdom in his medical skills and down-to-earth counsel as well as in his religious life.

The film is able to cover all aspects of the religious routine of the monastery in accurate detail. In fact, it communicates the life and spirit, the prayer, Eucharist, sung liturgy, silence and contemplation, the detachment of the vow of poverty, the taken-for-granted sacrifices of the vow of chastity, the work, the meals and the readings, the community meetings, the outreach. This is shown in episodes throughout the film which are as effective, even more effective, than a documentary.

All the time, the audience is challenged to wonder what they would do in such dangerous circumstances, especially after official advice from the area is given, recommending the monks leave and return to France. At a community gathering,

the superior asks them all to give voice to whether each wanted to stay or leave. Some speak in favour of leaving and explain why: family, illness, the opportunity to continue their work elsewhere. Some are still uncertain. Others wish to stay, intuitively knowing that this is where God wanted them to be. After the advice to leave, the monks listen to the opinions of the local people, especially those who come to the monastery for medical help. Their argument is that the monks remain in solidarity with the people.

For an audience wanting to know and understand something deeper about Christian spirituality, something deeper underlying, despite the sins and failures of the church and of church people and the consequent anger at abuse and scandals, these scenes offer a great deal to ponder.



So does the letter that the superior writes before the monks are abducted in vans, audio-taped for their identity, knowing that they are hostages, and led into the snow and the mountains to their deaths. He goes over the decisions and the motivation but also acknowledges that the monks have lived in a Muslim country with its Quranic ideals and spirituality and its God, far from the fanaticism of those who do not really read their scriptures fully or are caught up in bellicose righteousness.

Faced with the reality of impending death, like many a religious or a secular hero, they found their depths, despite any fear, and discovered a martyr's saintliness in giving a life for others. The director offers this very movingly, without words, as the community sit to enjoy something of a last supper together, the camera focusing on each, their smiles, then their tears, then their deep resignation, drinking a glass of wine together, and all to the rhythms and melodies of Tchaikowsky's *Swan Lake*.

Perhaps this makes it sound as if the film is offering a sermon rather than a movie story. It is a movie first and foremost and that is how it delivers its message, through story and in words and moving images.

* Fr Peter Malone MSC directs the film desk of SIGNIS: the World Association of Catholic Communicators, and is an associate of the Australian Catholic Film Office.

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

This is a tragic story but one which offers hope of how to live with one's neighbour in today's divided world. The author, John W. Kiser, spent two years researching and interviewing the families and friends of the seven French Trappist monks who were kidnapped from their monastery at Tibhirine, Algeria, in March 1996 and later executed.

The author also traces the history of the monks' monastery and the Church's development in Algeria and the tragedy of thousands of deaths, some of them from amongst the tiny Christian population amidst the 27 million Muslims.

This is a heroic story which offers inspiration and remarkable insight for the spirituality needed for Christians living in Muslim majority countries and for all of us living in our post-modern global village.

It is a story of prophetic contemplation, of how one can continue to show respect and forgiveness for one's neighbours in times of violence. In his Introduction Kiser calls the monks "Martyrs of Hope" and says:

They did not die because they were Christians. They died because they wouldn't leave their Muslim friends, who depended on them and who lived in equal danger.

The simple, everyday lifestyle of a Trappist monastery—prayer, study and manual labour—are an integral rhythm of the story and personal idiosyncrasies of individual monks are not hidden. The lack of vocal talent of some monks when they are appointed to lead the chanting of the daily prayers can become important matters in small communities!

The spirituality of the "dialogue of life" comes alive as the monastery's vegetable garden and its dispensary become the meeting places for Muslims and Christians. It was in the sharing of their hospitality that the Christian monks and Muslims became friends. One bishop called the monks the "lungs" of the Church in Algeria for they brought spiritual oxygen to Christians and Muslims alike.

The motives for the kidnapping and the cause of the monks' deaths remain a mystery. However, the telling of their story up until their kidnapping offers a ray of hope in an area of the world where there is still much unrest today. Most victims of violence seldom get a chance to have their story heard.

After his death the publishing of the moving "Testament" of Christian de Chergé, the prior of the community, presents him as a unifier, a visionary who has a deep love for Muslims (see pp 9-10). He offers an inspiring vision and, under the stress of increasing violence, a commitment to facing death out of love for one's neighbour.

His personal journey into Christian-Muslim dialogue began when, on national service in Algeria, he was rescued by Mohammed, a Muslim friend, on the occasion of an encounter with armed insurgents. His friend Mohammed intervened to protect Christian, pointing out his attachment to Algeria and his sympathy towards Muslims. Christian escaped unharmed but his Muslim friend's dead body was discovered the next day. Christian was devastated by this cruel murder and the experience was to change his life and nurtured a vocation to becoming an interreligious monastic.

Part of this calling led to participation in a prayer group called *Ribat-es-Salaam* (The Bond of Peace) which was initially a group of Christians who wished to deepen their spiritual life by sharing what they had discovered in their encounter with Islam. Later they were joined by members of a mystical Sufi brotherhood called *Alawiya* who sought the unity that can only happen in prayer. De Chergé said:

The faith of the other is a gift of God, even if I don't really understand that gift and it remains a mystery to me.

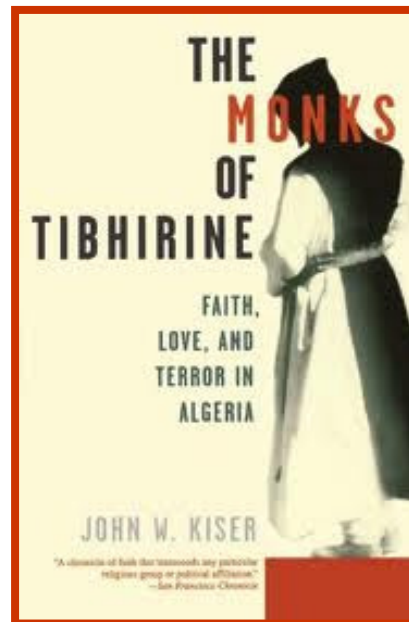
This gift given to the other is also in a certain way a gift given to me.

Christian de Chergé's reflections on Islam's place in God's plan of salvation come out of the every day encounters of the monks with their neighbours at Tibhirine and of course from their regular routine of prayer and contemplation.

It is a spirituality of the Way, of the path of encounter, rather than a systematic reflection on non-Christian religions.

A tiny community of Trappist monks founded in the year 2000 in Morocco by two monks who were absent at the time of the kidnapping continues the contemplative witness. As at Tibhirine they are a 'praying community among a praying community'.

** Father Brian Vale is a staff member of the Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations.*



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 Tibherine 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 Tibherine, 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 (for text and reflection see pp 9-10).

On the night of 26th/27th of March the seven monks at Tibherine 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 Tibherine 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.

[* I deliberately use the word “Islamist” to distinguish this ideological and violent version from authentic “Islam” which prohibits aggressive violence and attack on civilians.]

McGee, Martin. ***Christian Martyrs for a Muslim People***. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2008.

The author is an English Benedictine monk. He tells the story of the nineteen priests and religious sisters, including the seven Trappist monks of Tibherine, who stayed in Algeria during the 1990's and were victims of the violence sweeping that country. Based on their letters, journals and on interviews with people who knew them, he recounts their service and commitment to the country, which included the ultimate sacrifice of laying down their lives.

For trailer and press release see the film's official website at <http://www.sonyclassics.com/ofgodsandmen/>
For Martin McGee's review of the film see <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/features/2010/07/01/christian-martyrs-for-the-islamic-world/>
For Gareth Vile's review of the film see http://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/FILM_20101202_1.htm
For Elizabeth Lev's review of the film see <http://www.zenit.org/article-30844?l=english>
For an interview with the script writer for the film see <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/features/2010/12/20/%E2%80%98we-tried-to-portray-their-humanity%E2%80%99/>
For background on the church in Algeria see <http://www.zenit.org/article-30494?l=english>

The recent dramatic events in the Middle East have triggered seismic changes, but it is too early to see how they will unfold and what the final outcome will be. Hence they merit further investigation and comment.

In recent years there has been mounting tension between Christians and Muslims in Egypt, for example, the bomb explosion in the church in Alexandria on New Year's Day which killed 23 people and injured another 97. However, virtually unreported in the Australian press, was the fact that the following week thousands of Muslims went to the churches for the Coptic Christmas Vigil to express solidarity with the Christians and to form a "human shield" against the violent extremists: *"We either live together, or we die together."*

During the demonstrations in Cairo's Tahrir Square against the regime, Christians and Muslims were united in a common cause. Members of both communities chanted together in unison: *"Muslim, Christian, doesn't matter; we're all in this boat together."* This interfaith unity was symbolized by a crescent embracing a cross.

In an interview on the 17th of February Cardinal Sandri, the prefect of the Congregation for Eastern Churches, expressed the hope that "all will lead to tranquility, to a common life, to the quest for the common good for all Egyptians, in order to constitute a society worthy of man, more just and which gives everyone the opportunity to take part in public life."

He also expressed the hope that the new constitution will establish "fundamental principles" such as "the dignity of man and woman, liberty for all, a common life in respect of others and of the law."

- For "Muslims as Human Shields" see <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/3365.aspx>
- For "Muslims and Christians Protest as One" see <http://www.ipsterraviva.net/UN/news.asp?idnews=54416>
- For "Egypt's Muslims and Christians Join Hands" see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12407793>
- For a summary of Cardinal Sandri's comments see <http://www.zenit.org/article-31772?l=english>
- For women's participation in the demonstrations see <http://www.eurekastreet.com.au/article.aspx?aeid=25048>
- For comment by John L Allen see <http://ncronline.org/blogs/all-things-catholic/catholic-contribution-egypt>

Festival Sessions for "Of Gods and Men"

Adelaide

6:30 PM Saturday 26 March Palace Nova
6:30 PM Friday 1 April Palace Nova

Brisbane

6:00 PM Sunday 20 March Palace Centro
4:15 PM Saturday 2 April Palace Barracks

Canberra

7:00 PM Thursday 31 March Arc Cinema, NFSA

Melbourne

6:30 PM Sunday 13 March Palace Westgarth
6:00 PM Monday 14 March Palace Cinema Como
6:45 PM Wednesday 16 March Palace Brighton Bay
2:30 PM Saturday 19 March Palace Westgarth
6:00 PM Sunday 20 March Kino Cinemas
8:45 PM Friday 25 March Palace Cinema Como
6:30 PM Saturday 26 March Palace Balwyn

Sydney

7:00 PM Friday 11 March Palace Verona
1:30 PM Saturday 12 March Cremorne Orpheum
4:00 PM Sunday 13 March Palace Norton St.
3:15 PM Sunday 20 March Chauvel Cinema
9:15 PM Saturday 26 March Palace Verona

Perth

8:50 PM Saturday 26 March Cinema Paradiso
6:45 PM Saturday 2 April Luna on SX

Prayer of the Religious Brotherhood

Comprising Muslims, Jews and Christians, the *Religious Brotherhood* has met monthly in Cairo for decades. At the beginning of their meeting all the participants say the following words together:

***God, to You we turn,
In You we place our trust,
It's You for whose help we ask.
Urgently we ask;
Give us the power of faith in You
And the power to act rightly through the
guidance of Your prophets and messengers.
And we ask You, O God, to make every one of us
Loyal to his faith and his religion,
Without narrow-mindedness which harms us
ourselves,
Without fanaticism that does injustice to our
fellow citizens.
We beseech You, our Lord,
Bless our religious brotherhood.
Grant that sincerity determines us here,
Justice be the goal pursued here,
Peace be the good we find here.
O Thou Living, thou Eternal
To Thee be praise and honour.
Amen.***

Extract from Troll, Christian W. "Can Christians and Muslims Pray Together?" *The Way* 50, no. 1 (2011): page 69.

To purchase tickets go to the website of **The Alliance Française French Film Festival 2011** at <http://www.frenchfilmfestival.org/Films.aspx?articleId=4483> or contact your local **Cinema**.

WHAT'S COMING UP

- 09 March – **Ash Wednesday**: the beginning of the 7-week preparation for Easter by prayer and fasting.
- 21 March – **Harmony Day**: celebrating community harmony, participation and cultural diversity in Australia; sponsored by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC)
- 22 April – **Good Friday**: solemn commemoration of the death of Jesus Christ on the cross
- 24 April – **Easter Sunday**: celebrating the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead
- 05 June – **Ascension**: celebrating Jesus Christ's ascent into heaven
- 12 June – **Pentecost**: celebrating the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the apostles
- 10 July – **Abraham Conference**, North Sydney, NSW
- 01-30 August – **Ramadan**: the month of fasting for Muslims
- 31 August – **Eid al-Fitr**: the Muslim feast marking the end of the month of Ramadan
- 02-04 September – **National Conference of Ecumenical and Interreligious Commissions**, Adelaide, SA
- 04 September – **Multicultural Eid Festival and Fair (MEFF)**, Fairfield, NSW
- 22-25 September – **Australian Association for Mission Studies Conference**, "Mission in a Globalised World", North Sydney, NSW
- 27 October – **Assisi Prayer Day for Peace**: celebrating the 25th Anniversary of Pope John Paul II's initiative, Pope Benedict XVI has called world religious leaders to Assisi to pray for peace. It is hoped that similar gatherings of religious leaders will be held around Australia
- 07 November – **Eid al-Adha**: the Muslim feast commemorating Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son
- 26 November – **al-Hijrah**: commemorating the migration of the Muslims from Mecca to Medina in 632; marking the beginning of the Muslim New Year
- 05 December – **Ashura**: the tenth day of the month of Muharram; Shi'ite Muslims commemorate the death of Hussain.
- 25 December – **Christmas**: celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ

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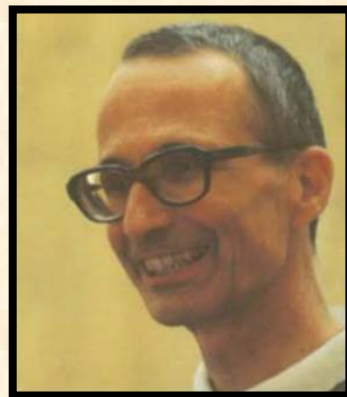
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Testament of Dom Christian de Chergé OCSO

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