

Of Gods and Men

The French Film, "Of Gods and Men" is a portrait of the Trappist monks living at Tibhirine, a remote monastery in the Atlas Mountains of Algeria, who were kidnapped and murdered in 1996. The story is told very simply by actors who completely disappear into their roles.

Below is the text of a letter written by the abbot shortly before the kidnapping.

Testament of Dom Christian de Chergé

(opened on Pentecost Sunday, May 26, 1996, 5 days after his violent death)

Facing a GOODBYE....

If it should happen one day - and it could be today -
that I become a victim of the terrorism which now seems ready to engulf
all the foreigners living in Algeria,

I would like my community, my Church and my family
to remember that my life was *given* to God and to this country.

I ask them to accept the fact that the One Master of all life
was not a stranger to this brutal departure.

I would ask them to pray for me:

for how could I be found worthy of such an offering?

I ask them to associate this death with so many other equally violent ones
which are forgotten through indifference or anonymity.

My life has no more value than any other.

Nor any less value.

In any case, it has not the innocence of childhood.

I have lived long enough to know that I am an accomplice in the evil
which seems to prevail so terribly in the world,
even in the evil which might blindly strike me down.

I should like, when the time comes, to have a moment of spiritual clarity
which would allow me to beg forgiveness of God
and of my fellow human beings,
and at the same time forgive with all my heart the one who would strike me down.

I could not desire such a death.

It seems to me important to state this.

I do not see, in fact, how I could rejoice
if the people I love were indiscriminately accused of my murder.

It would be too high a price to pay
for what will perhaps be called, the "grace of martyrdom"
to owe it to an Algerian, whoever he might be,
especially if he says he is acting in fidelity to what he believes to be Islam.

I am aware of the scorn which can be heaped on the Algerians indiscriminately.
I am also aware of the caricatures of Islam which a certain Islamism fosters.
It is too easy to soothe one's conscience
by identifying this religious way with the fundamentalist ideology of its extremists.
For me, Algeria and Islam are something different: it is a body and a soul.

I have proclaimed this often enough, I think, in the light of what I have received from it.
I so often find there that true strand of the Gospel
which I learned at my mother's knee, my very first Church,
precisely in Algeria, and already inspired with respect for Muslim believers.

Obviously, my death will appear to confirm
those who hastily judged me naïve or idealistic:
"Let him tell us now what he thinks of his ideals!"
But these persons should know that finally my most avid curiosity will be set free.
This is what I shall be able to do, God willing:
immerse my gaze in that of the Father
to contemplate with him His children of Islam
just as He sees them, all shining with the glory of Christ,
the fruit of His Passion, filled with the Gift of the Spirit
whose secret joy will always be to establish communion
and restore the likeness, playing with the differences.

For this life lost, totally mine and totally theirs,
I thank God, who seems to have willed it entirely
for the sake of that JOY in everything and in spite of everything.
In this THANK YOU, which is said for everything in my life from now on,
I certainly include you, friends of yesterday and today,
and you, my friends of this place,
along with my mother and father, my sisters and brothers and their families,
You are the hundredfold granted as was promised!
And also you, my last-minute friend, who will not have known what you were doing:
Yes, I want this THANK YOU and this GOODBYE to be a "GOD-BLESS" for you, too,
because in God's face I see yours.
May we meet again as happy thieves in Paradise, if it please God, the Father of us
both.

AMEN ! INCHALLAH !

Algiers, 1st December 1993

Tibhirine, 1st January 1994

Christian +

*Dom Christian was beatified with the eighteen others Martyrs of
Algeria on December 9, 2018.*