

BLESSED PIERRE CLAVERIE (1938-1996)

In January 2018, Pope Francis approved the beatification of Bishop Pierre Claverie and his eighteen companions. The murder of Pierre Claverie, a Dominican and the Bishop of Oran in Algeria, was the latest in a series of tragic killings that cast the Church of Algeria into grief between 1994 and 1996. The other victims were seven Trappist monks, four missionaries of Africa, a Marist friar, and a number of religious belonging to different congregations. Their deaths are inscribed in a dark decade during which between 150,000 and 200,000 people were killed due to religious violence and repression. It was precisely their free choice not to flee this violence for the love of Christ and the Church, which allows us to call these Christians “martyrs.”

Pierre Claverie was born in Algiers in 1938. He was a native son of colonial Algeria. In adulthood he confessed that he had lived all his youth among the Arabs without ever meeting them: “I lived my childhood in Algiers in one neighborhood of this cosmopolitan Mediterranean city. Unlike other Europeans, born in the countryside or in small cities, I never had Arab friends. We were not racist, just indifferent. We ignored the majority of the population of this country. The Arabs were part of the landscape of our outings, the background of our encounters and our lives. They were never companions.... I had to listen to numerous sermons about love of others, because I was a Christian and also a scout, but I never realized that even the Arabs were my neighbor. A war was needed for that bubble to burst,” he explained much later, recognizing that he had lived all his youth in a “colonial bubble.” This awareness, which corresponded to the

outbreak of war in Algeria and its proclamation of independence, constituted for him a real watershed, which led him, in 1958, to religious life in the Dominican order.

Pierre studied in Le Saulchoir, where his teachers were the great Dominican theologians whose work helped frame the ecclesiology proclaimed by the Second Vatican Council: Yves Congar, Marie-Dominique Chenu, and André Liégé. He graduated in 1967 with a solid intellectual and spiritual formation, which served him well later on. In the letters he wrote to his family, his precocious intellectual maturity shines through: “This morning, during prayer, I finally discovered the Triune God, who has always seemed to me to be simply a theological argument. I believe that it is the essence of Christianity – beyond the life of Jesus, his teaching, his Church, he reveals God to us, not only as a Father God, but giving us the image of what we are called to be: those who participate in a current of love that unites the Father to the Son through the Holy Spirit,” he wrote in May 1959.

Ordained a priest, Pierre joyfully joined the small Dominican community in Algiers which, under the guidance of Cardinal Duval, contributed to the existence of a new type of Church, a Church for a country whose population was predominantly Muslim. For this reason, he learned Arabic well enough that he could teach it to others. But above all, “he learned Algeria,” establishing a magnificent network of Algerian friends who meant a great deal to him. As the country began the process of reconstruction after a bloody war (1954-1962), there was a lot to do in the education and training of leaders. Pierre Claverie made his contribution with the priests and religious of Algeria who put themselves at the service of their neighbors, collaborating in the development of the country. It was a very happy period of his life. He offered a beautiful homage to these friends, present in the Cathedral of Algiers on the day of his episcopal ordination: “my Algerian brothers and friends, I owe to you who and what I am today. You welcomed me and supported me through your friendship. I owe to you my discovery of Algeria. Although it is my country, I lived in it as a stranger throughout

my youth. With you, learning Arabic, I learned, above all, to speak and understand the language of the heart, that of fraternal friendship through which peoples and religions communicate. In this regard, perhaps I am weak and fallible but I believe that this friendship withstands time, distance, separation. Because I believe that it comes from God and leads to God.”

His solid formation led him to participate decisively in the theological reflection of a Church that needed to rethink the meaning of its presence in Algeria. It was not there to proselytize among Muslims. On the contrary, through the witness of faith and its gratuitous action in the service of the country and of its humblest people, the Church could offer an active presence of evangelical love and help heal the wounds inherited from the colonial past and the war of liberation. Only the fruitfulness of witness and the work of the Holy Spirit can convert hearts and move them in freedom towards Christ and his Church. In this capacity, Pierre Claverie assumed the direction of the diocesan center of studies in Algiers and collaborated with the bishops on the drafting of theological documents that attempted to articulate the meaning of a Christian presence in a Muslim world.

In 1981, his strong personality and personal charisma earned him the nomination as bishop of Oran, in the west of the country. His diocese had few faithful, but it was international, and Pierre loved his role as a builder of communion, not only among Christians of different origins, but also with Muslim friends of the Church. He made the choice to make the property and buildings of his diocese available for the needs of the country: libraries for students, a reception center for people with disabilities, a training center for women. With his Muslim collaborators, he established relationships of trust and friendship that would prove to be precious during the tragic decade of the 1990s. God alone can bring a heart to conversion. The Christian faithful are few in number, but a true Christian witness can be given to all the Muslims with whom Christians live and work daily.

On the occasion of a conference at the Paris mosque in June 1988, Pierre rejected political hypocrisy and stressed, without hesitation, that “in the

ensemble of relations that have marked the relationship between Christians and Muslims, dialogue has not always been the rule.” Indeed, he said, the opposite had often been the case. “Polemics and controversies.” Continuing his frankness, he pointed out the obstacles. Beyond the vicissitudes of history, he said, the underlying problem is the difficulty of “acknowledging and accepting otherness.”

When dialogue was limited to words, often ambiguous, sometimes misleading, Pierre Claverie preferred encounter, since the latter involved people. He maintained that nothing could be done if it did not start with creating bonds of trust and friendship. This is what allows things to be accomplished together, allows people to face common challenges and even more complex questions. The Christian must be able to explain why their faith in the Trinity is not polytheism; the Muslim, in turn, will be able to underline how the text of the Koran or the personality of Mohammed moved them, things that are so misunderstood by Christians. One of the miracles these meetings can achieve is to help heal the wounds of the past, which make the relationship between Christians and Muslims often hindered by tenacious fears and prejudices. The reciprocal and honest knowledge of a healthy dialogue between religions helps to promote religious freedom, the right to proclaim and to witness, the right to free conversion and religious adherence.

Beginning in 1990, Algeria fell into a decade of violence. The new political openness of a multi-party system after twenty-five years with a single-party regime favored the emergence of radical religious parties. At the time of the local legislative elections, these parties garnered the majority of the votes and were just about to take power when, in 1992, the military regime decided to stop the electoral process in order to prevent the establishment of a religious dictatorship. Frustrated by not being able to obtain power through voting, the fundamentalist fanatics tried to take it with arms. They began by assassinating hundreds of representatives of the state (judges, police officers), then moved on to the symbolic figures of an open

civil society (journalists, writers), and finally, they targeted foreigners. The murder of the first two Christian religious, in May 1994, was a trauma for everyone. The killing of the seven Trappist monks in 1996 scandalized the great majority of Muslims.

Pierre Claverie was the last Christian killed. It must be added that he had not only made the choice to remain in Algeria but also, and above all, to speak courageously, expressing himself publicly in favor of a “plural, non-exclusive humanity.” He said, “We are exactly in our proper place, since it is only in this place that we can glimpse the light of the Resurrection and, with it, the hope of a renewal of our world.” He was assassinated on August 1, 1996, along with a Muslim friend, Mohamed Bouchikhi, who had made the choice to stay with him despite the risks. His death shocked not only Christians but also many Muslim Algerians who, at his funeral, said they had come to weep over a man who was also “their” bishop.

Baptised
and sent

October
2019