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ORDO
CISTERCIENSIS S.O.

ABBAS GENERALIS

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TIBHIRINE TODAY

(Circular letter to the members of the Order on the 10th anniversary of the passage
of our Brothers of Our Lady of Atlas)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

This letter will reach you on or near a day which is not the usual one for a letter from me, but which you will easily understand and accept, namely, the tenth anniversary of the Easter passover of our seven Brothers of Tibhirine.

A few months after the eloquent tragedy of their death, on October 10, 1996, Pope John Paul II sent us a message from Gemelli Hospital, where he was convalescing. The message ended with the following words:

Brothers and Sisters, you are the custodians of this memory, guardians in prayer, in common discernment, and in the concrete directives which you establish so that the memory of this event be fruitful in the future, for Trappists and for the whole Church.

Ten years later, we are able to say that this memory is more alive than ever. It has been the object of our prayer, our discernment and our concrete directives, even though the latter have not produced the fruit which we hoped for. To commemorate means to remember and not to forget, to work and not to faint. May the Lord grant that this simple “commemoration” move our hearts into action, so as to translate into works our many thoughts and desires.

Before continuing, I would like to repeat what was already said nine years ago on the occasion of the first anniversary of the Brothers’ death. The Church in Algeria is a true depository of the memory of the Atlas monks. She has received a heritage which is too big for us, and we want to express our solidarity with her so as to be truly co-heirs.

1. Tibhirine and Midelt

The social and political situation of Algeria in 1996 was difficult for all of its citizens, as well as for foreigners, due to the lack of security in the country. During the previous three years there had been many victims of both terrorism and its repression, including 19 Christian religious men and women who gave witness with their own blood to Gospel love, a witness to the people at large and to the many Moslems who are open to living together in peace, valuing what is different in each person.

Our Brothers of Atlas were kidnapped during the night between March 26 and 27. Then they disappeared into the darkness. Only a month later, on April 26, Communiqué n° 43 from the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), dated April 18 and signed by Emir Abou Abdel Rahman Amin (known as “Djamel Zitouni”), was published in the London newspaper, *Al Hayat*. The communiqué explains the “theological” reasons behind the kidnapping. A few days later, on April 30, a person named Abdullah was commissioned to leave a cassette with the voices of the seven monks at the French Embassy in Algiers. It had been recorded on April 20. Unknown to us at that time, it was immediately authenticated by the Archbishop of Algiers, Henri Teissier.

Several weeks of uncertainty followed. Finally, on May 23, Radio Medi 1 – the French-Moroccan radio station – broadcast a new communiqué (n° 44) from the GIA. Thus we learned of the monks’ death and its meaning to those who had kidnapped them. The execution took place on the morning of May 21.

On May 30, in circumstances still unknown to us, the mortal remains of our Brothers appeared. The next day we were able to authenticate them in the morgue of the military hospital of Aïn-Naadja in Algiers. The funeral rites were held in the Basilica of Our Lady of Africa on June 2 in combination with those of Cardinal Duval. Two days later, on June 4, we were able to give our brothers honorable burial in the cemetery of the monastery.

On June 5, 1996, after speaking at length with Fathers Amédée and Jean-Pierre, I drew up an official document to say that *“After the departure – which we hope is only temporary – of all the monks from Tibhirine, your community of Fez in Morocco can no longer be looked upon as a simple annex house of Tibhirine. You constitute the community of Our Lady of Atlas, and therefore are an autonomous Major Priory.”*

At the end of January 1999, during the special visitation of the community at Fez by the Abbot General accompanied by the Abbot of Aiguebelle, the election of a new Prior takes place and the community decides to stay permanently in Morocco, with the hope of moving to a place near the city of Midelt. At the same time, Aiguebelle opens an annex house in Algeria with a group of volunteers from several monasteries of the Order. Its name is Our Lady of Tibhirine.

At the present time, the community of Our Lady of Atlas continues its life in Morocco at Midelt. It is made up of four brothers, of whom three have stability at Atlas: Père Amédée is the oldest, having celebrated his 85th birthday; Père Jean-Pierre follows at a young 82; the youngest is Père Jean-Pierre II, Superior of the community and 55 years old; and the fourth member is Brother Louis, who is 81 and has his stability at Mont-des-Cats. The community left the city of Fez in March, 2000, and moved directly to where it is now established, in buildings previously occupied by the Franciscan Missionary Sisters of Mary, near Midelt.

The present community of Our Lady of Atlas is convinced that interreligious and intercultural dialogue can only take place within a context of friendship. The brothers want to live in this new context the spiritual heritage left by their brothers of Algeria. Their witness consists simply in being a praying Christian community, open to solidarity with the Arab-Berber-Moslem world, living at the same time in deep communion with the local Church of the diocese of Rabat.

The special situation of the community clearly deserves our attention, esteem and support. The four Brothers at Midelt are open to receiving other members of the Order who seriously wish to share in their special vocation and mission. In fact they are ready to share their property and their goods – both material goods and spiritual goods – with a female house of the Order that feels called to offer a presence of this type in the midst of the Moslem world.

On the other hand, we regret that the desires of the Order and the efforts of Aiguebelle to repopulate the monastery of Tibhirine have so far fallen through, for reasons beyond our control. However, the last word has not been said. This final word belongs to the Lord and he will say it at the right time. Hope never dies, even when it is killed, since it is kept alive by patience working against all despair.

Our hope of returning to Tibhirine is wounded and we now accept not seeing the future. In the strong words of Father Christian:

Wanting to see or imagine the future is to write hope-fiction, which seems to me to be a way of violating the future.... Evidently, since we do not have God's own imagination, when we think about the future we think about it in terms of the past.... When we are in a tunnel we see nothing, but it would be absurd to wish that, when we get out of the tunnel, the landscape be the same as when we entered it.... We must let the Holy Spirit do his work, and He may go fishing. That is his problem. I call this attitude, "poverty" (Algiers, Lent, March 8, 1996).

2. Judicial Investigation

Several important facts referring to our Brothers still remain unknown: Why were they kidnapped? Where and in what conditions were they detained for those two months? What was the reason for their execution or violent death? Different hypotheses were proposed from the very beginning. Even at that time I received a document signed by the authority of the Islamic Coalition of Salvation (FIS) in exile, limiting its responsibilities and pointing to the security forces of the Algerian government. The official version is still valid, which says that the monks were victims of the rivalry among the terrorist groups. Others think differently, affirming that the Algerian security forces, infiltrated among the guerrilla groups, were involved in the unfortunate end of our brothers' lives. Moreover, the French intelligence services knew the situation well, since they were involved thanks to the contacts made by the French Embassy in Algiers.

It is understandable, then, that on December 9, 2003, a civil suit against X was presented to the highest Court of Paris by Dom Armand, Abbot of Scourmont, and by members of the family of Father Christophe Lebreton, in order to establish the truth and see that justice is done.

More than two years have now passed since the investigation began. One could wish that by now we could see more clearly what had happened, but we have to say that such is not the case. The investigation has advanced very, very slowly, although we know that such things are slow and go on for a long time. So far, the judge responsible for the investigation has favored the information coming from Algiers, which happens to be very slow in coming. Wouldn't it have been better to begin by questioning the French government officials of the time, the dissident Algerian military officials and the members of the family who support the judicial investigation? Several people are beginning to think, with a certain justification, that there is a conspiracy of silence, which is trying to bury the truth along with the dead. There is a danger that national security, the preservation of bilateral relations and the honor of the military intelligence services end up by silencing the truth and giving preference to appearances.

Every human being has an inalienable right to know the truth concerning the facts that affect him and to obtain justice concerning responsibility for them. This would be enough to justify the request for a judicial investigation concerning the death of the monks of Algeria. All the more so since the request for the investigation comes from persons united to the victims by the bonds of blood kinship, affection and the spirit. Therefore, we agree and support everything done in this regard.

What I have just stated with as much conviction and respect as possible does not prevent us from expressing at the same time another conviction, the one that has guided our actions until now. Only a sincere act of forgiveness, which is the fruit of an attitude of heartfelt mercy, can break the chain of lies, hate and violence. Our history witnesses to too many injustices committed precisely in the name of justice.

3. The Beatification Process

On May 7, 2000, a celebration was held in the Roman Coliseum on "20th Century Witnesses to the Faith." On that occasion, Archbishop Teissier of Algiers received several requests concerning the introduction of the cause for the beatification of the recent witnesses to the faith in Algeria. The Archbishop immediately contacted the Superiors General of the respective religious Orders and Congregations. From the very beginning, all of us agreed that it would be a process which would include the 19 religious men and women assassinated during the tragic decade of the 1990's. Our Postulatrix consulted the communities of Atlas, Aiguebelle, Tamié and Bellefontaine on the point and received a favorable reply from all these communities.

So since May 2002, there have been several meetings in Rome of the Postulators, sometimes with the Superiors General, in order to agree on how best to introduce the cause. Due to the political issues involved in the death of our Atlas brothers and of Bishop Claverie of Orán, it was suggested that perhaps these eight martyrs should be put aside for the moment so as to facilitate the process, but this suggestion was unanimously rejected: All 19 together or none of them! The presence in our meetings of an official of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue was extremely stimulating as it became clear that the process is both timely and important in the present context of relations with the Moslem world.

Only recently, in May 2005, was a general Postulator for the cause appointed. A formal request was then made to the eight religious Congregations involved, for them to prepare the necessary documentation for the future introduction of the cause. The following month, Archbishop Teissier and a group of Postulators present in Rome visited the Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation for the Cause of the Saints. The Prefect had a general knowledge of the history of these witnesses to the faith and was not surprised that different hypotheses were circulating concerning our monks' death and that of the Bishop of Orán. For everyone present, the physical fact and theological presence of martyrdom was beyond questioning. On October 16, the general Postulator sent the official petition for opening the cause to Archbishop Teissier, who had the documentation sent to the Roman Congregation for its *nihil obstat*. We are still waiting for a reply from the Congregation. Even before that, the Archbishop had, at our request, named two theologians as censors to examine the many writings of Fathers Christian and Christophe.

During our General Chapter last October, the Assembly voted in favor of the following proposition: *Should the local Church of Algiers introduce the cause of martyrdom of all 19 witnesses to the faith in Algiers, among them our seven brothers of Atlas, we accept that our Order will pay its part of the expenses and collaborate in the technical process.* This proposition was accepted by a very large majority: Yes: 152, No: 7, Abstention: 7 (Vote 30).

Finally, on April 6 of this year, there was a meeting with Archbishop Teissier to evaluate the work done so far. All the religious Congregations involved have prepared their pertinent documentation and have collected the personal writings of the witnesses to the faith. The list of persons who could testify in the process has already been prepared, but it is almost impossible to collect the testimony of Algerian Moslems, due to the situation that reigns in Algeria. The theological censors of the writings of our Brothers are now finishing their work.

There is no doubt that one of the crucial points of this process is the concrete formula to be used in presenting the cause of beatification. Fortunately there is complete agreement on this point, namely, that the presentation must make its own the spirit which inspired these 19 witnesses to Christian faith and love. This means: fidelity and unconditional love of the Algerian people; absolute respect for the faith of our Moslem brothers; a free choice to remain in the country despite the danger, sharing the hopes and sorrows of this suffering people; unconditional forgiveness of any possible assassin, for he knows not what he is doing; a deep desire to continue being a channel of peace, dialogue and friendship; a deep communion with Christ and his Body, the Church, in Algeria, offering a Gospel witness of a small Church of prayer in the midst of others who also pray.

4. The Law of Amnesty and Reconciliation

Recently, last February 28, the Algerian military forces obtained a law of amnesty, the consequences of which are still unknown, but with provisions contrary to the human rights established and defended by several international conventions. What's more, a presidential directive for putting into practice the *Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation* in Algeria punishes, with 3 to 5 years in prison and a fine of from 3000 to over 5000 dollars, "anyone who uses... the wounds inflicted by the national tragedy to harm the institutions of the Republic..., who stains the honor of its agents who have served it worthily, or who damages the image of Algeria in the international context".

It is not necessary to say that the witness and the passing of our Brothers is very clearly one of the “wounds” of the national tragedy of Algeria in the recent past. Proclaiming or saying that there are different hypotheses concerning those who are responsible for the death of the monks of Atlas, especially if these hypotheses point to the national security services, has become an “act of sabotage to the peace of Algeria”.

Within this context of the presidential decree, we should also understand the ban on visiting the monastery without military escort, even only every two weeks. Some think that the purpose of this ban consists in avoiding the possibility that Tibhirine become a holy place of Christian or Moslem pilgrimage. Nevertheless, others think that the prohibition should be seen in another context, namely, the law recently promulgated to normalize religious practice. This latter law was designed against the proselytizing by Evangelical sects from North America in the region of the Kabyla.

In any case, for our part, without wanting to offend or incite anyone, or to get involved in the internal affairs of social or national groups, we are obliged to say that we will never put a muzzle on the mouths of our seven Witnesses, who gave their life for love, with love and simply in order to love without distinction of race or creed. “If we keep silent, the stones will shout!”, they said, faced with a criminal situation of violence and death. We make our own those very words proclaimed by them and taken from the Gospel. Only the greater good of the Pilgrim Church in Algeria can cause a prudent silence as we wait for a more favorable moment.

The cancellation of the projected pilgrimage to Tibhirine is a part of this larger context. It had been carefully organized by the Abbot of Aiguebelle to take place on May 21st and would have included the presence of members of the brothers’ families and members of the Order. Actually, the purpose of the pilgrimage as a sign of our peaceful presence in friendship and communion would have been impossible to achieve, since the military escort would have a counter-effect for the simple country people, undermining what we want to witness to and live.

5. Interest in the Event and the Writings

Many books and articles have appeared in recent years about the situation of the Church in Algeria and, more specifically, concerning the events at Tibhirine and the message of the seven Witnesses of Atlas. To summarize all of these publications here, even briefly, is impossible, since there are over 50 of them. However, we must refer to a few of them.

In the first place, and above all, there are the writings of the Brothers themselves. Very shortly after the events took place, a collection of these writings was published under the title, *Seven Lives for God and for Algeria*. Then several of the works of Father Christian were published with the title, *Hope Unconquerable*. That same year a collection of a hundred poems of Father Christophe appeared with the general title, *Love to the End of the Fire*. Two years later his diary was published as *The Breath of the Gift*.

The Abbey of Aiguebelle has started a collection called *Notebooks of Tibhirine*, with the purpose of a broader diffusion of the monks’ writings and of studies about them. Two volumes have already appeared, containing community chapter-talks and homilies of Father

Christophe. They have suggestive titles: *God in Daily Form* and *The Other we Wait for*. other notebooks will follow these two, such as: the homilies of Father Christophe, the Diary of the community, the retreats preached by Father Christian. The work is immense, but the workers are very few.

In this context it is also important to mention the studies of the Institute of Sciences and Theology of Religions (ISTR) of Marseille. Several of these studies have already been published in the weekly magazine, *Paths of Dialogue*. They deal with the Eucharist, the communion of Saints, martyrdom, interreligious dialogue and the theology of religions.

Two young women theologians in Switzerland and Italy are preparing their doctoral theses on the writings of Father Christophe. Mirella Susini, who already has her doctorate in foreign literature, will soon defend her doctoral thesis in theology at the Pontifical University of the Franciscans, the *Antonianum*. Its title is: “*You are the Most Beautiful Risk*” – *The Dogmatic Theology in Monastic Mode of Christophe Lebreton: Trappist, Priest and Martyr*. At the same time, in the School of Theology of the University of Fribourg, Marie-Dominique Minassian is presenting her thesis under the title: *The Spirituality of Brother Christophe, Monk and Martyr of Tibhirine: Elements for a Theology of Gift*.

This growing interest in the writings of the Brothers of Atlas clearly shows three characteristics of their writings: the rich Christian and evangelical quality of their authors, their deep spiritual and theological content, and the literary or poetic quality which supports their message.

6. Brother Michel: the “m.”

Once arrived at this point of the present letter, I do not hesitate to speak of Martyrs and of Martyrdom. Let me share with you a conversation I had with Pope John Paul during a private meal on the occasion of the Synod for the Americas in November 1997. Father Stanislaus Dziwisz, the Pope’s private secretary, asks me, “When will they beatify the monks of Atlas?” I answer, “There is no hurry. These things take time.” He immediately tells me, “You have to begin now, because they are martyrs.” Then he turns to John Paul and says to him, “Holy Father, they are martyrs, aren’t they?” The Pope looks me straight in the eye, as only he could, and tells me emphatically, “They are martyrs!”

We all know that our Brothers of Atlas refused to speak about their situation as if it were one of “martyrdom.” Even less did they consider themselves “martyrs.” If it had been otherwise, they would have disqualified themselves and the situation would have been embarrassing for everyone. But if we keep silent, it would be even more shameful and our lack of responsibility would be irreparable. Their humble refusal to speak much about their situation did not keep them from explicitly discussing the theme of martyrdom in relation to what they and many others were living. Quite the contrary. It explains why at least three of the Brothers, foreseeing the possibility of a violent death, wrote their “testament”, which in Latin is *testamentum*, and in Greek *martyrion*. Once again, this refusal, which honors them, would imply that we are blind, deaf and ungrateful cowards.

6.1 Christian Martyrdom Today

Christian martyrdom has been enriched through the history of the Church with deeper meanings than the original one of the first centuries. In fact a form of speaking that was highly esteemed in former times has disappeared in our day, such as when someone talks about the “glory of martyrdom.” How can you speak of “glory” when what happened is the result of homicide by someone else? When martyrdom is understood in the context of a spirituality of self-offering, the death of any disciple of Christ is not related so much to the violence of the assassin, but rather to the free, conscious gift of one’s own life. So the martyr can say, in communion with Christ: *No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down on my own* (Jn 10:18). Thus Christian martyrdom is not improvised, nor does it happen by chance. It is a gift and a vocation, and therefore implies increasing freedom and awareness in relation to this divine work which is taking place from within the depth of the person’s heart.

The source, journey and final goal of Christian martyrdom is Christ himself. It could not be otherwise. The following of Christ on the part of the disciple called to martyrdom is marked by the blessedness of the peacemakers, which means that it is vibrant through faith, hope and charity. Forgiving the final enemy in order that he or she becomes a friend is an integral part of the prayer taught by the Lord and left as his heritage to us. The martyrs actualize this forgiveness in their last, supreme hour. The gift and offering of the vocation to martyrdom is, when the “hour” arrives, a gift that takes the body into itself or, in the French words of Father Christophe, *le don que prend le corps*. The body of the martyr is changed into a “sacrament” – a visible and efficacious sign – of the intention to give oneself as an offering with Christ for the glory of God and the salvation of all people. This is how the sacrament of Baptism is actualized. The gift offered in martyrdom is ultimately lived as “Eucharist,” as thanksgiving and sacrifice pleasing to God. Thus martyrdom, Liturgy, service and prophecy all converge to form a single reality.

All these qualities of martyrdom are clearly reflected, in one way or another, in the lives and the writings of the 19 martyrs of the Church in Algeria.

6.2 The Journey of Brother Michel

This May 21, the anniversary of the passover of our Brothers, coincides with the birthday of Brother Michel, who at that time was celebrating 52 years of age and now would be 62. That is why it seems timely to present the spiritual journey of Michel as it can be seen in the few texts written by him. They challenge us today with the eloquence of a life lived in the fullness of self-offering.

6.2.1. Glory, Salvation and Divine Strength (Jan. 6, 1983)

Our journey begins on January 6, 1983. That is the day Michel composes a text on the occasion of his simple profession. It begins with the words, “*For the glory of God and the salvation of the world: of the ‘multitude,’ the world of little ones, of the poor, the marginated, the workers.*” It is easy to recognize the liturgical and biblical inspiration behind this text, as well as the sacrificial and redemptive character which Michel wanted to give to his profession of monastic life from the very beginning.

The text concludes with a quote from St. Paul, written in red ink and seemingly added at a later time: *My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness* (2 Cor 12:9).

6.2.2. Associated to the Paschal Mystery (May 30, 1993)

Ten years later, on the feast of Pentecost, May 30, 1993, Michel drew up an “Act of Self-offering”. It is Vespers of the Christian feast of the Visitation and the Moslem feast of the Sacrifice, Aid-el-Kebir.

The social and political context of Algeria lets us into the meaning of Michel’s self-offering and helps us understand it. The political situation was rapidly falling apart. The preceding 14th of January, Mohammed Boudiaf had assumed the presidency of the Supreme Commission of State. Six months later, on June 29, he is barbarically assassinated. Five months after Brother Michel’s Act of Self-offering, on October 30, the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) lays down an ultimatum to all foreigners, who are told to abandon the country within the next 30 days. In these circumstances, on December 15, 12 Croatians are massacred near Medea. Then on Christmas Eve, December 24, Sayah Attiya, Emir of the GIA, visits the monastery.

The text of Brother’s Act of Self-offering seems to have been written at two different moments, which would explain the additions made in parentheses. The abbreviations seem easy to understand. Here is a translated transcription of the text:

*Holy Spirit Creator,
let me enter – as soon as possible...
not my will but yours – the Paschal
Mystery of our Lord Jesus Christ in
the ways which You want – I am certain that You,
Lord [J], You will live it in me – and for
whatever purpose you may want. [In the i. of M^{ry} and of the
Apo.] Deign to receive this poor offering
of your unworthy servant [Jn 15,12-16 and ‘friend.’ M.],
[for the p(rai)se of your glory]
and to consume it in the fire of your Love.
You, who live in the cmn of the F. and of the S.,
praise and glory to you for all the ages.
Given on this blessed day of Pentecost
May 30, 1993
br. M. the m.
[N.B. Vigil of the feast of the Visitation and of the feast of the Aid-el-Kbir]*

We can see four important elements in this text, which converge and so help us to interpret their meaning.

- In the first place, the text is a prayer to the Holy Spirit Creator, asking to *enter* as soon as possible into the *Paschal Mystery* of the Lord Jesus Christ, in whatever way the Lord wants: *not my will, but yours*. We can easily see the reference to the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane as Calvary looms on the horizon.

- It is an expression of total trust and *certainty*. The act of martyrdom will be accomplished by the Lord Jesus himself, who *lives* in Michel, as He wants. It is and will be done in imitation or in the image of Mary and the Apostles.
- Michel considers himself an unworthy servant, but also a *friend* of the Lord, since the latter has let Michel know all that he has heard from his Father. And what the Lord Jesus has heard and now shares with Michel is this: *none has greater love than those who give their life for their friends*. Moreover, Michel knows that he has been chosen by Jesus and destined to bear abundant, lasting fruit (Jn 15:12-16).
- The reference to the moslem feast of the Sacrifice, Aïd-el-Kbir, also puts us in a context of offering. It is a question of Abraham's sacrifice of Ismael (sic). The intervention of God's angel lets him *pass* from an imminent death to life.

The entrance into the Paschal Jesus, who dies and rises for our salvation, is achieved by the Spirit for the glory of the Father and gives all its theological power to Brother Michel's Act of Self-offering. In the last analysis, it is the Paschal Jesus who associates Michel to his passover. This element is strengthened when we bear in mind that the Act of Self-offering was written on a postcard from the Little Sisters of Jesus, which represents the Paschal Mystery. A final question remains: in such an intimate and solemn text, what does the abbreviation, "m", which follows the abbreviation of Brother Michel's name, mean? Something intimate is hidden here, due to a certain spiritual modesty.

Perhaps in this period of his Act of Self-offering or shortly afterwards – although this is only a conjecture – Michel was reading, meditating and copying at two different times several paragraphs of a conference given by the then Archbishop of Marseille, Cardinal Etchegaray. The text of this conference was published in July of that same year in *Documentation Catholique*. Curiously, almost every time that the words, "martyr" and "martyrdom", appear in the text of the conference, Michel abbreviates them to "m".

6.2.3. Human Weakness and Divine Strength (Dec. 25, 1993 and June 5, 1994)

Thanks to what is revealed in the Diary of Father Christophe, we know what the experience of Brother Michel was that Christmas Eve of 1993 and what feelings he had after the unexpected visit that occurred then: *Things are not the same as before. Ever since they were here I have lost my strength* (Diary, Jan. 28, 1994). Wouldn't this be the time to remember the text he had written for his profession: *My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness* (2 Cor 12:9)?

1994 was not an easy year for the Church in Algeria, nor for the many other citizens of the country who were not responsible for the violence that seemed to reign supreme. In March of that year, during Lent, I met Christian at the monastery of Timadeuc. He obviously went into detail about the visit of Sayah Attiya on Christmas Eve. For my part, I told him about the difficult situation which the communities of Angola and of Marija-Zvijezda in Bosnia were going through. I explained to him that we had foreseen all that was needed for a transfer of the community from Bosnia to the monastery of Engelszell in Austria. Christian understood that the permanence of his own community in Algeria was also at stake. With a relaxed smile I told him, "The Order has a greater need of monks than of martyrs." He was silent, then he looked at me with the smile of an accomplice and said, "There is no opposition." We both understood that they would stay in Algeria as long as there were no clear signs to the contrary. Later, on several occasions, Christian came back to these words, interpreting them and bringing their meaning up to date.

During Holy Week of that year, Christian centered his homilies on the theme of martyrdom. He did the same on May 22, the day of Pentecost, and returned to the theme with greater insistence in something he wrote on July 17 for the commemoration of the first African martyrs. On May 8, Henri Vergès and Paule-Hélène Saint-Raymond are assassinated. They are the first Christian martyrs of the Catholic Church that lives and suffers in Algeria.

We thus arrive at the month of August, 1994. On some day of that month and year, Michel sends to his cousin, Joseph Crand, a letter written on the back of a picture of the Virgin of Tenderness. What interests us here are the central paragraphs of the letter:

“Martyr” here is a very ambiguous word... If something should happen to us – I do not want it to – we want to live it here in solidarity with all Algerians who have already paid with their lives, joined very simply with all these unknown, innocent people... It seems to me that He who helps us today to continue here is the one who has called us... I am always deeply amazed at this: “The one who gives us security with you (people of Algeria) in Christ and who anointed us is God; he has also put his seal upon us and given the Spirit in our hearts as a first installment” (2 Cor 1:21-22). This is a word from St. Paul that was given to me during our Liturgy of the Hours on the solemnity of Corpus Christi, after reflecting in community on the events of May 8.... It is a word that continues to speak to me and that has been given to me like a strength to live peacefully today with my Brothers. I am not at all a herald, but rather a zero... NB. 2/ Certainly if we were directly threatened, we would leave....

In the light of my dialogue with Christian at Timadeuc and of his reflections on Christian martyrdom on the occasion of Holy Week 1994 and the following feasts, it is easy to understand the words of Brother Michel about the *ambiguity* of martyrdom in the context of Algeria in the decade of the 90’s and the deep desire for solidarity with the Algerian people. It was clear at that time for Michel and the community that, if they were directly *threatened*, they were ready to abandon the country, so that Algeria and its people not be blamed for their death!

However, the principal motive of Michel’s letter is to tell his cousin Joseph about the grace received on the feast of *Corpus Christi*, which that year fell on July 5. Michel is aware – even to the point of amazement – that he has received a strength and an anointing which come from God through the Spirit of Christ and the divine Word proclaimed in the Liturgy. It is a word that will be clarified in the context of a community dialogue on the deaths of Brother Henri and of Sister Paule-Hélène. This *strength* from God contrasts with the human weakness that he experienced on Christmas Eve, 1993. It is a *strength* that is completely compatible with the fact of knowing and confessing oneself to be a “zero”. The grace received by Michel is the Lord’s reply to the request made in preparation for his first profession in 1983: *My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*

And finally it is worth noting that in this text, which reveals Michel’s heart, there is something unusual, especially in the original French. The word, “herald” (*héraut*, in French), is misspelled and appears as *hérault*. Moreover, what would Michel have proclaimed as a “herald” and then count as worthless, “zero”? It is possible, even probable, that he wants to make a more obvious contrast and to say, “hero” (in French, *héros*, the sound of which is easily mistaken for *héraut*, herald), but it did not come out that way! In any case, Michel could easily have meant, *“I am not at all a hero, but rather a zero.”*

6.2.4. Testament (August 15, 1995)

The grace of fortitude he received on the day of the Body and Blood of Christ, *Corpus Christi*, will remain present and active in Michel despite the fact that the situation in the country goes from bad to worse. For example, on October 23, 1994, Sisters Caridad and Esther of the Augustinian Missionary Sisters were assassinated “on the doorsteps of the church, at the hour of the Eucharist, which they celebrated in all truth” (Fr. Christophe, Diary, Oct. 24, 1994).

On November 25 of the same year, the Bishops of Algeria make themselves heard: *In the present crisis of Algeria, more than at any other moment, our Christian vocation is shown in all its purity as an invitation to follow Christ on the path which makes his life become an offering for the people. This offering reveals the tenderness of God for everyone. We want to put into practice, here in Algeria, the covenant God has made with all men and women* (Letter, Nov. 25, 1994).

A few months later, at the end of 1994, on December 27, four White Fathers give their lives at Tizi Ouzou: *offered with the Friend they followed to the end* (Fr. Christophe, Diary, Dec. 28, 1994).

It is not strange that, in this context of violence and danger, Brother Michel saw the possibility of his death approaching and composed a short “*Testament*” in case it should happen. This is precisely what he did on August 15, 1995, Feast of the passing, or Assumption, of the Virgin Mary. In its simplicity and transparency, the text reveals a heart made peaceful and ready for the gift of self unto the end. However, its simplicity does not take away from its solemnity. The text has a title, a date and a signature, which is rare among the normal writings of Brother Michel. On a very small, 3 x 5 inch library card written on both sides, we read:

Testament

of b. Michel

1) Burn all that you might find written in my handwriting, as well as certain unusable books (B.J., NT-TOB, etc)

2) Marie-France... Louis... do not think of blaming my superior... and b. of my community... because in faith... ‘Their Word has been a lamp for my steps’.

3) For the last Eucharist=Take the texts of the day, because ‘Their Word has been a lamp for my steps and a light for my path.’

Do not forget the Magnificat.

Long live God. Long live the Church. Long live Algeria.

Until we meet again. See you soon.

On the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, 8/15/95

b. Michel

N. B. Ask the God of Mercies to forgive all my sins.

And Give thanks to the Lrd for He is GOOD.

The testament of Brother Michel in all its simplicity perfectly reflects the personality of the author. It contains three posthumous requests: burn the books which are unusable because of their continual use or because of colored underlining, marginal notes, etc.; do not reproach Fr. Christian (Prior and brother) for the fact of having remained in Algeria despite the danger; and take for the funeral Eucharist the readings prescribed for that day, adding, however, the

Magnificat of the Virgin Mary, which is read during the Eucharist of the feast of the Assumption.

But if there is anything that is surprising, it is the following: both the word of the Superior and the Word of the Scriptures have enlightened and guided Michel's steps until this day on which he draws up his testament, or "*martyrion*", and – we can add – continued to enlighten and guide his pilgrimage until his last breath.

The testament ends with a proclamation of divine goodness (the capital letters are in the original French). He uses the refrain of Psalm 135 (136 in the Hebrew), which is also the refrain that begins and concludes Psalm 117. We have here two Easter psalms, *par excellence*. The passing or passover of Michel, which he so ardently desires in union with that of Christ, is near. The Spirit will consume the offering.

6.2.5. Litany of the Martyrs (December 26 and 28, 1995)

The wave of violence continued its march of death. On November 10, 1995, four months after Michel wrote his testament, Odile Prévost, a Little Sister of the Sacred Heart, is assassinated: *so that the 'others' may become an offering made holy by the Spirit and pleasing to God, there is no other way than to offer oneself in You, with You, through You* (Fr. Christophe, Diary, Nov. 11, 1995, under the date of Nov. 7, 1995).

On November 21, and still under the shock of this witness unto death, the Atlas community draws up a carefully written document in reply to the question: *In the present situation, how do we live out the charism of our Order?* We read there that: *The violent death – of one of us or of all together – would only be the result of our choice to live in the following of Christ* (Document, Nov. 21, 1995).

With all these antecedents, it is not surprising that Brother Michel would write a *Litany of the Martyrs*, which he began on the feast of the first martyr, St. Stephen (December 26), and finished on the feast of the Holy Innocents (December 28). The dates are very revealing. Here is the litany:

Litany of the Martyrs

Lord, have mercy.

Christ, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

Jesus Christ, hear us.

Jesus Christ, answer us.

Heavenly Father, you are God, have mercy on us.

Loving Son Redeemer of all worlds, you are God, have mercy on us.

Holy Trinity, you are only one God, have mercy on us.

12-26-95 Saint Stephen

Jesus (Master and Lord) example of the martyrs

Jesus glory of the martyrs

Jesus crown of the martyrs

Jesus wisdom of the martyrs

Jesus Pardon of the martyrs
Jesus Passion of the martyrs
Jesus Light of the martyrs
Jesus Grace of the martyrs
Jesus Strength of the martyrs
Jesus Reward of the martyrs
Jesus Feast of the martyrs
Jesus Life of the martyrs
Jesus Eternal Life of the martyrs
Jesus Love of the martyrs
Jesus Spirit of the martyrs
Jesus Charity of the martyrs
Jesus King of the martyrs
Jesus Hope of the martyrs
Jesus Rock of the martyrs
Jesus honor of the martyrs
Jesus Refuge of the martyrs
Jesus Protector of the martyrs
Jesus Stronghold of the martyrs
Jesus perseverance of the martyrs
Jesus endurance of the martyrs

12/28/95 Holy Innocents

Jesus First Fruit(s) of the Kingdom...
Jesus Glory of the Innocent...
Jesus freedom of the oppressed...
Jesus freedom reviled...
Jesus Lamb of God...
Jesus Shepherd...
Jesus life, support and shield...
Jesus Lamb most pure...
Jesus Help

Michel treats both Jesus and God the Father with a mixture of the familiar style, where the verbs are in the singular, and the formal style with the verbs in the plural. It shows at the same time his trust and his respect. The final litany remains unfinished, as a simple cry for assistance: Help! Brother Michel's intention is clearly to unite himself to Jesus Christ and to all the martyrs in their final, absolute witness, sealed with the offering of their own life.

6.2.6. Last Desire (March 25, 1996)

Finally, in the same little folder of personal notes where he wrote the Litanies, we can read under March 25, 1996, the final witness written by Michel one day before he was kidnapped: "My God, if you exist, grant that I may know you!". As Michel himself points out, these are words of *f. Charles (de Foucauld)*, a most original "martyr"!

What could be the meaning of these words for Michel in his life at that moment?
We can leave the reply in a respectful silence, or better, we can confess our ignorance.

However, a question had remained in suspense from the beginning: the meaning of the letter “m.” after Michel’s signature in the Act of Self-offering of May 30, 1993. Rational science will not give us the answer, but perhaps contemplative wisdom and fraternal love can bring us closer to what Michel hinted at. That day, Michel received a call, an invitation, to unite himself with his crucified Redeemer by means of the grace of martyrdom, which explains his signature at the end of the Act of Self-surrender: *Br. M. the m(artyr)*. This is in total agreement with the sacrifice of his Eucharistic self-gift on the day of his profession: *For the Glory of God and the salvation of the world*. On that Pentecost Day, Michel received the vocation to martyrdom and began a pilgrimage in faith and love, a pilgrimage sealed by the divine strength made manifest in human weakness. That day Michel received the gift of a special conformity to Christ, which he understood, accepted, then hesitated, trembled, asserted himself and gave himself over to it.

On May 21, 1996, Brother Michel celebrated his 52nd birthday. That same day, together with his 6 Brothers in community, he gave back to the Lord his body and blood: the blood and the body which the Lord had given him for the sake of us all. On that day, Christ repeated his own self-gift in the gift which our 7 Brothers made of themselves.

What is the Spirit of the Lord teaching us through the lives and words of our 7 Brother martyrs? Very probably we will not receive the grace of sealing with our own blood the authenticity of our life witness. Nevertheless, there is nothing that prevents us from being “martyrs” like them, according to the gift that the Spirit gives. In an undated homily, which was almost certainly given during 1995, Father Christophe said somewhat enigmatically: **“martyr – monk → the total gift is, or should be, the m.”** In other words, the monk is also called to be a martyr: the total gift of one is the same as of the other. But, how? Three texts of Father Christian give us the answer:

The witness of Jesus unto death, his “martyrdom,” is a martyrdom of love, of love for man, for all members of the human race.... Unfortunately, we have all lived enough to know that it is impossible for us to do everything out of love. Therefore we cannot pretend that our life be a witness to love, a “martyrdom” of love.... We know from experience that often the small gestures of love are more difficult, especially when you have to repeat them every day. We can wash the feet of the brothers on Holy Thursday because it is soon over with, but what if we had to do it every day and to everybody? When Father Bernardo tells us that “the Order has more need of monks than of ‘martyrs’,” he is not speaking about this particular martyrdom of the monk through all these little things. We have given our heart “wholesale” to God and that is more difficult, since He takes it from us “retail.” It costs more. Putting on an apron, like Jesus did, can be as important and as solemn an act as giving one’s own life... and vice versa: giving one’s life can be just as simple as putting on an apron. (Fr. Christian, The Martyrdom of Charity, Holy Thursday, March 31, 1994)

It seems to me that today [at the Easter Vigil] we receive an overflowing invitation to this “martyrdom” which has been prepared for us, the martyrdom of hope. No, this martyrdom is not at all glorious or breathtaking. It exactly fits all the dimensions of our daily living. And it has always defined the monastic state of life: step by step, drop by drop, word for word, shoulder to shoulder... and having to begin the regular life again every morning, and every evening, too: having to keep ruminating, correcting,

discerning and, above all, waiting (Fr. Christian, The Martyrdom of Hope, Easter Vigil, April 2, 1994).

The word, “caritas”... is the final purpose of the entire Rule and of the Benedictine school which that word defines: charity, love, expansion of the heart,... all of that lived in the patience of stability and perseverance. It is our way of “sharing in the sufferings of Christ,” our martyrdom, which should therefore be a “martyrdom of love” and at the same time a “martyrdom of hope” (Fr. Christian, Community Chapter of March 16, 1996).

When all is said and done, it is still true that “the Order has more need of monks than of martyrs,” but at root there is no opposition. They coincide.

Most affectionately in Our Lady of St. Joseph,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bernardo Olivera". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Bernardo Olivera
Abbot General OCSO

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