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ORDO
CISTERCIENSIVM S.O.

ABBAS GENERALIS

Prot. N° 96/AG/02

May 27, 1996

OUR BROTHERS OF ATLAS
For a faithful reading of the events

Very dear Brothers and Sisters,

During these days in which we are living, between Pentecost Sunday and Trinity Sunday, when at the cathedral of Algiers, as in all the communities of the O.C.S.O., we will be holding a memorial for our seven Brothers of Atlas, it seems to me important to try to reread in the light of faith the events which have affected us all so profoundly since the announcement of the death of our Brothers.

A witness not to be forgotten

The Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* of Pope John Paul II concerning preparation for the Jubilee of the Year 2000 recalls that the Church of the first millennium was born from the blood of martyrs. *This is a witness not to be forgotten* (TMA,37). Our Brothers of Atlas leave us this witness today, when we are about to celebrate in 1998 the 900 years of the foundation of Citeaux and, in the year 2000, the 2000 years since the birth and death of Jesus Christ. A witness not to be forgotten.

The mystery of man, of every man, is only truly manifest in the mystery of the Word made man: the witness of our Brothers as the witness of all of us monks and nuns, men and women believers, can only be understood in the light of the witness of Jesus Christ. And here is the witness of the Faithful Witness: God is Love! Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing! May your Kingdom come, forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us!

By a vow of "stability" until death

Communities of the Order and stability

The decision of our Brothers of Atlas is not unique. All of us, as monks and nuns of the Benedictine-Cistercian tradition, take a vow of "stability" which binds us until death to our community and to the place where that community lives. Many communities of our Order faced with war and armed violence in the course of these past years have had to reflect anew and seriously on the meaning of this commitment and make the decision whether to leave their monastery or to remain in that place. This was the case with the communities of Huambo and Bela Vista in Angola, with the community of Butende in Uganda, with the community of Marija Zvijezda at Banja Luka in Bosnia, and quite recently with our Brothers of Mokoto in Zaïre.

While Huambo, Bela Vista, Butende and Marija Zvijezda chose to remain where their monastery was, the Brothers of Mokoto decided to take the road to exile. In each of these cases the decision was taken by the whole community as a result of community discussions.

How can we understand the depth of this vow in the life of a monk? Perhaps the text of the letter that Father Christian had planned to send on the 28 December 1993 to Sayah Attiya, chief of the GIA and of the armed group who came to the monastery on Christmas Eve, could give us the sense of this vow: "Brother, allow me to address you like this, as man to man, believer to believer (...). In the present conflict in which our country is living, it seems to us impossible to take sides. The fact that we are foreigners forbids it. Our state as MONKS (ruhân) binds us to the choice of God for us, which is prayer and the simple life, manual work, hospitality and sharing with everyone, especially with the poor (...) These reasons for our life are a free choice for each one of us. They bind us until death. I do not think that it is the will of God that this death should come to us through you (...) If, one day the Algerians judge that we are unwelcome, we will respect their desire to see us leave. With very great regret. I know that we will continue to love them ALL, as a whole, and that includes you. When and how will this message reach you? It doesn't matter! I needed to write it to you today. Forgive me for having written in my mother tongue. You understand me. And may the ONLY ONE of all life lead us! AMIN!"

Community Discernment

I think it is important to recall here the major stages of this discernment as the Brothers of Atlas were able to live it since the visit of six armed persons on the eve of Christmas 1993 when they had sought to compromise them and oblige them to "collaborate" with the armed movement (medical aid, economic support and logistical help). When the Wali (= the Prefect) of Medea offered them armed protection, the monks refused since they wished to be a sign of peace for every one. They also refused to live in an area "protected" by Medea rather than in the monastery. They agreed to close the doors from 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 in the morning and to have a new telephone line laid to the house of the guardian.

In the days that followed, the monks decided finally, through a series of community votes, to reject any form of collaboration with the armed group (except, if necessary, medical aid in the monastery itself), to remain in Atlas, though provisionally reducing the number of brothers in the monastery, not to return to France if they had, one day, to leave Atlas, but rather to go to Morocco, and wait there till circumstances enabled them to return to Atlas.

They decided, finally, not to receive any novices at Atlas. To the Apostolic Nuncio who had invited them in a letter of 24 June to come and live at the Nunciature, the brothers replied that for the moment they didn't see the need to transfer the community to the residence of the Nunciature but that if the time came for this, they would discern with the Nuncio and the Bishop what they ought to do.

On the 16 December 1994, the Brothers of Atlas, at the end of further community discussions, had wished to take new votes to confirm their option of the previous year. Mgr. Teissier, who had come to visit them during this time, had left them a message in which he thanked them for taking this risk of prolonging their presence and their witness, even though armed groups were increasingly passing through their district. He told them once more how significant was their presence of prayer and daily work in Tibhirine for the whole Christian community of Algiers and he thanked them for the courage of this fidelity.

Possibility of a violent death

In the discernment which led to this decision to remain at Atlas despite the prevailing tense situation, the Brothers were conscious of the possibility of a violent death. The letter Father Christian wrote to me after the assassination of the two religious sisters in September 1995 said it clearly: "The celebration had a beautiful atmosphere of serenity and offering. It brought together a very small church, whose remaining members are perfectly conscious that the logic of their presence must include henceforth the possibility of a violent death. It is for many as if it were a new and radical immersion into the very charism of their congregation...and also a return to the source of the first call. For all that, it is clear that the desire of all is that none of these Algerians to whom our consecration binds us in the name of the love which God brings to them, may wound this love by killing any of us, any of our brethren". Father Christian's reflection on the possibility of a violent death had become his prayer, that of a man who wants to be totally disarmed of any form of violence in face of his fellow, his brother: "Lord, disarm me and disarm them".

On at least three other occasions, especially on the assassination of other men and women religious to whom he was close, Father Christian recalled this possibility. After the assassination of the Marist brother Henri: "I was personally very close to Henri. His death seemed to me so natural, so in keeping with a long life entirely given to the humdrum. He seemed to me to belong to the category that I call "martyrs of hope", those who are never spoken of because all their blood is poured out in the endurance of day to day life. I understand "monastic martyrdom" in this sense. And this instinct leads us, at present, to change nothing, except in an on-going effort at conversion (but there again, no change!) (Letter of 5 July 1994).

After the death of the Augustinian missionaries when the Brothers once again made the choice of remaining in spite of the risks: "(...) The communities of men seem to be standing by their option to remain. This is clear so far for the Jesuits, the Little Brothers of Jesus, all the White Fathers. It is also clear for us. At Tibhirine as elsewhere, this option has its risks, that is obvious. Each one has told me that he wants to take them, in a journey of faith into the future, and in sharing the present with a neighbourhood who have always been very much bound to us. The grace of this gift is given to us from day to day, very simply. At the end of September we had another nocturnal "visit". This time the "brothers of the mountain" wanted to use our telephone. We pretended that we were listening-in... then we emphasized the contradiction between our state and any kind of complicity with what could harm the life of another. They gave us assurances, but the threat was there, supported by arms." (Letter of 13 November 1994).

After the assassination of the sisters of Our Lady of the Apostles: "The Pope has been kind enough to send a special delegate to preside at the obsequies, the Secretary of the Congregation for Religious, etc. We were able to meet him this afternoon at a meeting of Bishops and Major Superiors. He was particularly impressive. With a smile and with great conviction, he confirmed us in our present situation, in relation to the history of the Church, to the design of God, and to our religious vocation which includes the possibility of "martyrdom", as well as to the need for availability for that form of personal fidelity which the Spirit wishes to arouse and give here and now. This does not stand in the way of certain concrete dispositions and elementary reflections of prudence and discretion" (Letter of 7 September 1995).

Martyrs of love and of faith

In the course of the XX century, two other communities of our Order have given to the Church and to the world authentic martyrs of love and faith: the 33 martyrs of Notre Dame de Consolation, in China, in 1947-1948, and the 19 martyrs of Our Lady of Viaceli, in Spain, in 1936-1937. The cause for the beatification of these martyrs has already been introduced in Rome. Our seven Brothers of Notre Dame de l'Atlas come to give us the same testimony of love and faith.

In these three situations, it is not a matter of an individual grace but of a community grace. In a cenobitical context such as that of a Cistercian monastery, it is difficult not to be gripped by this fact of a life lived and given together. And this community grace of martyrdom will equally be an ecclesial grace. The love of our Brothers for the Church of Algeria and for their local Church of Algiers is well known. Their life and their death is written in the register of all those men and women, religious, Christians and Muslims who have lived and given their lives for God and for others.

In the name of the Gospel

On the 27 April 1996, a month after the abduction of the monks, the newspaper *Al Hayat* published extracts from communiqué 43 of the Groupe Islamiste Armé (GIA), dated 18 April: the emir of the GIA would not recognize the *aman*, the protection which his predecessor had accorded them, and moreover this *aman* would not have been licit since the monks, so the communiqué reported, "have not ceased to invite the Muslims to be evangelized, to display their slogans and symbols and to commemorate their feasts with solemnity". The emir states, moreover, that "monks who live among the working classes can be legitimately killed", and this is the case with the monks of Atlas: "they live with people and draw them away from the divine path inciting them to be evangelized". And he ended by saying: "it is also licit to apply to them what applies to lifelong unbelievers, when they are prisoners of war: murder, slavery or exchange for Muslim prisoners". Then comes the warning: the non-liberation of the prisoners of the GIA will have as consequence the death of the monks. "The choice is yours. If you liberate, we shall liberate, if you refuse, we will cut their throats. Praise be to God." Our Brothers have been condemned to death in the name of the Gospel they professed. Condemned to death for the "glory of God".

Forgiveness of enemies

After the assassination of Br. Henri, Father Christian wrote to a group of friends: "There is no greater love than to give one's life for those we love... said Jesus in the Gospel of th is 8 May 1994. If this word sounds so right for the life of Br. Henri, it is not because it describes his last day. It is because we recognize that our brother was essentially "given" to the point of that perfect gift of forgiveness included in advance in the first proposition he sent me to adjust to the present situation the concrete orientations of our [group]: In our day to day relations, let us openly take the part of love, of forgiveness, of communion, against hate, vengeance, violence" (Letter of 15 May 1994).

At the end of the retreat before Christmas 1994, Father Christophe recapitulated the special points of this retreat, those that had struck him, challenged him. I could quote it all. I take this paragraph from the middle of his text: "And I see clearly that our particular way of living - as cenobitic monks - well! it resists, it holds fast and it supports. To explain this a little. The

Office: The words of the psalms resist, are an integral part of the situation, violence, anguish, lies and injustice. Yes, there are enemies. One cannot force oneself to say too quickly that one loves them, without doing an injustice to the memory of the victims whose numbers increase each day. Holy God. Strong God. Come to our help! Come quickly to our aid!"

At Easter 1995 I was with the Sisters of Huambo in Angola; the war was only a few months over. On Easter morning, Sister Tavita made her temporary profession. She had chosen as the Scripture reading for her profession the passage from the Gospel on love of one's enemies. Trial can be a crushing experience: it can also give place to forgiveness and love of enemies. It has a meaning, a meaning of receiving and recognizing. And it is perhaps only the discovery of this meaning which enables Father Christophe to lend to Brother Luc the last word which comes to conclude and sign his reflection at the end of this spiritual retreat: "For the first of January 1994, the beginning of the year and the month of his 80th birthday, in the refectory, we heard the cassette which he was keeping in reserve for the day of his funeral: Edith Piaf singing: "No, I have no regrets!" "

With the slaughtered Lamb

"Then I saw: a lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered... (*Apocalypse* 5,6).

"Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah, for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they did not cling to life even in the face of death." (*Apo* 12, 10-11).

"After this I looked, and there was a great multitude...standing before the throne and before the Lamb...who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb...and the Lamb will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (*Apo* 7, 9.14.17).

Executed

On the 23 May 1996, we learned from the French Minister for Foreign Affairs that a Moroccan radio had broadcast a new communiqué (number 44) from the GIA. This communiqué speaks of the execution of our Brothers by their kidnappers and must be read in the light of the previous communiqué and the reasons for their condemnation recalled by the emir of the GIA and which allowed for: murder, slavery or exchange for Muslim prisoners. As there has not been an exchange of prisoners, the GIA has decided to apply the predicted sentence: "On the 18 April 1996, we published a communiqué (...) And we said: If you set free (Abdelhak Layada...), we will set free (the monks), if you refuse, we will cut their throats. On the 30 April 1996, we sent an emissary to the French ambassador (...) bearing an audio cassette proving that the monks were still living, and a written message detailing the clauses of the negotiations, if they (the French) wished to recover their prisoners alive. At first they showed themselves disposed (to do this) and wrote us a letter signed and sealed (...) Some days later, the French president and his Minister for Foreign Affairs declared that they would not dialogue or negotiate with the Groupe Islamique Armé. They interrupted what they had begun and we have cut the throats of the seven monks, faithful (in this) to our promise (...) Praise be to God (...) And this was done this morning (21 May)"

Let the voice of our martyrs resound!

The life and death of our seven Brothers of Atlas is a witness not to be forgotten. Let not diplomacy, politics or a non-transcendental view of these events come to deprive us of the voice of our martyrs and silence the clamour of their cry of love and of faith. From the martyrdom of spiritual combat to the martyrdom of blood poured out, it is the same cry which calls to forgiveness and love of one's enemies. Life is stronger than death: love has the last word!

Dear Brothers and Sisters, at the dawn of the 9th Centenary of Citeaux and of the Jubilee of the Year 2000, these events are a "sign of the times" for us, a Word of God which will not return to him without having made our hearts fertile and fruitful. Today, if you hear his voice as persons and as communities, do not close your heart but hear this pressing invitation to persevere in conversion and in the radical journey of the following of Jesus and his Gospel. May the example of our 7 Brothers stir up in us the fire of love (*ferventissimo amore*, RB 72) until we owe nothing but to love one another, and until we can love and forgive those who have killed our Brothers. It is only in this way, by forgiving and loving to the end, that we will be Christians like Christian, and that we will be able to reach the end of our lives like him, making our own the words of his testimony:

And you too, my last minute friend, who would not have known what you were doing,
 Yes, for you too I say this THANK YOU and this "A-DIEU"
 to commend you to the God in whose face I see yours.
 And may we find each other, happy "good thieves", in Paradise,
 if it please God, the Father of us both. AMEN!

I embrace you fraternally in Mary of Saint Joseph,

Dom Bernardo Olivera
 Abbot General

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CISTERCIENSIIUM S.O.

ABBAS GENERALIS

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Rome, June 11, 1996

OUR BROTHERS OF ATLAS - II

Chronicle of the trip to Algeria
from 30 May to 6 June 1996

Thursday 30 May

Armand and I left Rome at 15:25 on Air Algeria flight 2025. The flight was scheduled for 13:10, which means it was 2:15 hours late. We arrived at the airport at Algiers at 15:45, local time, after an uneventful flight of 1:20 hours. We were met at the airport by Father Amédée and a Dutch White Father. On our arrival we were surrounded by nine plain-clothes policemen who were responsible for our security. The police looked after the formalities of control and customs and at the end of half an hour we all went out together by a side door (a group of French journalists from "Antenne 2" were waiting for us at the main door!). During the drive to the Diocesan House, our car was preceded and followed by two police cars. When we arrived, we were told that a police escort would be placed at our disposal during all the time we were there. Before leaving the airport, we were informed of the death, that same morning, of Cardinal Duval, retired Archbishop of Algiers; he was 92 years old.

When we arrived at the Diocesan House, the first person who came to greet us said, almost in a murmur: Have you heard the news? We replied: What news? They have found the seven monks! Alive? Dead... Msgr. Teissier had gone to see the French Ambassador, M. Michel Lévêque, who had told him the news at about 16:15. We had already passed into Msgr. Teissier's library-reception room, where there was a group of people come to present their condolences on the death of Cardinal Duval. Among those present was Madame Boudiaf, widow of the former Algerian president assassinated three years ago; there were also the director of the newspaper *Liberté* and his wife. On the faces of all these persons was reflected the suffering of the Algerian people in face of the very difficult situation the country is going through at present; it was not difficult for me to recall all that we experienced of the same kind of thing in Argentina during the 70s.

A little after 17:00, Msgr. Teissier returned and informed us of the recent events. The authorities had told him (also the Ambassador) that the bodies would be put in coffins that had come from Marseilles and would be taken to the military hospital of Algiers on Friday afternoon. On hearing this news, we explained to Msgr. Teissier the importance of being able to identify the bodies of the Brothers ourselves. Monsignor thought this would not be possible, but that the remains had already been identified by local people (so it seemed). We telephoned the Ambassador to let him know our desire to identify the bodies; he thought there would be no problem. For me, as for Armand, it was a very important point. We then broached with Msgr. Teissier the question of the funeral ceremony and burial of the Brothers. The funeral ceremony would take place in the Basilica conjointly with the funeral Mass for Cardinal Duval. Then Msgr. presented us with four possibilities for the burial. I shared with him the desire of the families of the Brothers as they had been told me by Dom Étienne of Bellefontaine during a telephone call the same morning: all

together, in Algeria, and if possible at the monastery itself. I told him this was also the desire of the monastic family. Monsignor doubted very much whether the authorities would allow it. We insisted on this point and finally Monsignor put us in touch with the Ambassador. The Ambassador told us that the authorities would certainly make difficulties on grounds of security, but that if everything were done with discretion, then the authorities would give their consent.

From our arrival until after the meal the telephone never stopped ringing. We were asked to make statements to the press, radio and television. We stressed the fact that there was nothing much to say at present. Then, we agreed with Msgr. Teissier to organize a meeting with the journalists the next morning at 9:00. We feel a great solidarity with Msgr. Teissier and we share his pain. He has a very heavy cross to bear. We expressed our gratitude to him and told him that we are ready, for our part, to help him (to "lighten his burden") as much as possible.

About 21:00 Dom Étienne called me and, among other things, told me that the review *Paris Match* mentioned the existence of a videocassette sent to the French authorities on which one could see the assassination of the brothers of Atlas. The families are in agreement in asking the authorities to destroy this film; they asked my opinion and I agreed, if this video really exists... Obviously, the existence of this recording has political and international consequences... But let us leave that to the politicians, diplomats and journalists; for us monks, our part is to find the "hand of God" in all that happens, even if it is not easy to discern the hand of God among so many human hands.

Friday, 31 May

The meeting arranged with the journalists took place at 9:00. Profound questions were addressed to Msgr. Teissier who explained the meaning of Christian's testament and the Christian value of forgiveness. For my part, I explained the meaning of the events for our Order, and the importance of the identification of the bodies. I repeated the importance of forgiveness; the demand for forgiveness is a very powerful word addressed directly to the merciful heart of God and not to "human justice". Dom Armand took up the question of the recognition of the bodies which had taken place that day and expressed the desire of the Order and of the families that the Brothers be buried at the monastery; he added a few words on the future of the community and of the monastery.

At 11:00, the Ambassador, with the Consul general and a young Algerian doctor of the Embassy, came for us in an armored van (Msgr. Teissier, Fr. Amédée, Dom Armand and myself) and we drove to the military hospital of Aïn Naadja. Once we were in the van, the Ambassador confided to us several details about the discovery of the remains and asked us not to take photos.

Arriving at the hospital, we were received very cordially by some doctors and the Colonel Director General. They explained to us with great sensitivity that the death had taken place about ten days ago and that the remains had been buried, then disinterred. They thought and hoped that Msgr. Teissier would be present to say a prayer in the presence of the coffins which had already been closed. For our part, we stressed the fact that we wished to identify the bodies ourselves. They explained to us then that all the norms required by forensic medicine in such cases had been followed: photos, radiography, etc. The Colonel added that in no way would it be inconvenient to reopen the coffins so that we could carry out the identification we were asking for; he would warn us of the emotional shock this normally produced. We told him only some of us would carry out the identification. We asked Father Amédée to remain in the reception room where we had been received; in the end he agreed and said that he would use the time to pray the Office of Sext.

At 12:15, we were taken to the department of Forensic Medicine (the morgue). We decided that only the Consul general (who would draw up the official certificate of death), the Embassy doctor,

Dom Armand and myself should proceed to the identification. In a large room they had arranged the seven coffins, very simple and discreet, and on each of the coffins a red rose. In the face of what we saw next, we couldn't help thinking of the Precursor of Jesus, Saint John the Baptist. It was all over in 20 minutes.

At 13:15, we arrived at the French Embassy for a meal with some other personalities: various Ambassadors, the Nuncio and Vicar General of the diocese, Msgr. Belaïd Ould Aoudia. At the beginning of the meal Msgr. Teissier thanked the Ambassador for all he had done during these two months concerning the monks of Tibhirine. Dom Armand added a few words of thanks in my name and in the name of the Order.

At 15:00, we returned to the Diocesan House. Monsignor told me he was thinking of going to see the Minister of the Interior about the burial. I asked Dom Armand if he could accompany him in order to express in the name of the Order and the families our desire that the monks should be buried at the monastery; Monsignor agreed. At 16:40 they returned with the good news: the Minister had agreed to our request. He asked only that it should be an act of a private character, for reasons of security. The burial would take place on Tuesday morning.

At 16:30 again we went, all together, in two cars of the bodyguards to Notre Dame d'Afrique to pray beside the remains of Cardinal Duval. The Cardinal was lying dressed all in red. The link with the seven poor coffins of our Brothers, upon each of which rested a red rose, came immediately to mind: on the one hand and on the other, they had given the same witness of peace, love and harmonious living together. At 17:30 we celebrated Mass here. At 18:23 we returned to the Diocesan House. On our arrival, a journalist who specialized in matters concerning Islam was awaiting me: he told me with great emotion of all his personal pain and that of the Algerian people in the face of what had befallen our Brothers. During this time, Dom Armand had gone to the studio of TF 1 for a live broadcast of the 20:00 Telenews (in France). He announced, among other things, that the burial would take place at the monastery on the following Tuesday.

Saturday, 1st June

We stayed at the Diocesan House all day. Before the midday meal Monsignor told us the latest news: The Minister of the Interior had decided that we would be a small group, (about ten people), going to Tibhirine with the coffins by helicopter the following Tuesday; this was for reasons of security and to avoid the presence of crowds and of journalists.

After the midday meal, I was able to meet with Fr. Amédée for a very long time, almost three hours. We went through the contents of a small suitcase with all the personal documents of the Brothers. I chose recent photographs of each of them in order to make copies and to send them to the persons closest to them. I advised him to preserve all this documentation preciously, for it would certainly be useful and necessary one day. We also discussed other practical questions concerning plans for the future and for the monastery.

From 18:00 onwards, those invited began to arrive for the obsequies of the next day: Cardinal Arinze (papal delegate), the four Bishops of Algeria and seven members of Brother Christophe's family; Élisabeth and François, Vincent and Thérèse, Claire, Xavier and Madame Finot, Brother Christophe's godmother. I felt that the Lebreton family understood the deep significance of the events better than many other people: a prophetic mystery of the "sensus fidelium" of the people of God! They gave me a copy of three recent poems of Christophe. I extract from each of these poems some of the phrases that seem to me most enlightening:

I belong to Him, and walking his way, I go toward my full paschal truth.

Seeing the road things and the turn of events are taking...
I tell you truly, truly, it's O.K.

The flame has bent over, the light has slanted
I am able to die
and here I am.

Sunday, 2 June

After lunch, I had a good meeting with Father T.B. of the diocese of Oran and a great friend of Christian. I asked him to send me in writing his experience of the night of 27 March; he promised he would do it the same day.

During the morning, I prepared the "testimony" I had been asked for, for the Mass this evening. I gave it to Father P.L. (from here) to read and he gave his full agreement to it. Then we read it together with Fr. Amédée:

What can a monk say about his brother monks? I know, as they did, that our charism in the Church is to be silent and to work, to intercede and to praise God. But we know, too, that there are times to speak as there are times to keep silence.

The hidden voice of the monks has remained silently in the cloisters of Notre Dame de l'Atlas for more than fifty years. This same voice was changed during the course of the last two months into a cry of love which has resounded in the heart of millions of men and women believers and men and women of good will. Our seven brothers of Tibhirine, Christian, Luc, Christophe, Michel, Bruno, Célestin and Paul are today transformed into spokesmen for so many stifled voices and unknown persons who have given their life for a more humane world. Our seven monks lend their voice to me, too, today.

The witness of the monks, as that of every believing Christian, can only be understood as a prolongation of the witness of Christ himself. Our life following Christ should manifest without any ambiguity the divine gratuitousness of the good news of the Gospel which we desire to live: a life given, offered, is never lost; it is always found again in Him who is the Life.

We must enter into the world of the other, be he Christian or Muslim. In effect, if the "other" does not exist as such, there is no space for true love. Let us be disturbed and enriched by the existence of the other. Let us remain open, sensitive to every voice that challenges us. Let us choose love, forgiveness and communion against every form of hatred, vengeance and violence. Let us believe without flinching in the deep desire for peace which resides in the depths of every human heart.

Our brother monks are a ripe fruit of this church which is living its Pasch in Algeria. Our brother monks are also a ripe fruit of this people of Algeria which received them and esteemed their life during so many years of presence and communion. For this reason, a word of thanks on our part for you all is called for. Church of Algeria, all you Algerians, adorers of the one God: a big Thank You for the respect and love you have shown for our brother monks.

*Listen, if you can possibly listen:
To come to Him is to leave oneself.
Silence: up there is the world of vision.
For them, our monks of Tibhirine, the word is only Seeing.
Amen.*

When the moment came to name each Brother, we had to stop reading: tears full of love giving us eyes of glory to see the invisible made us bow our heads in silent prayer.

Towards 11:30 I met Father T.B. I asked him for an explanation of the theme they had worked on together at Easter 1995, in the "Ribat" group (an Islam-Christian group which met for prayer, founded in the monastic context of Tibhirine). He explained that the theme was: "O God, You are our hope". Father Christophe had added in his commentary: "on the face of all the living". He sent me a copy of the complete text of Christophe and so I was able to read it:

In this theme, if I pray it and seek to understand it, to bring my heart and mind into agreement with what I am saying, with what the Spirit wishes to say in me: I find You first on the face of all the living: I am the one whose face is looked into by You among all, chosen, elect, seen, loved. If I truly wish it...And as for the others? So that each one might become face, You can do nothing else but look into the face of each man and woman...

All this is linked with the end of Christian's testament: *And you too, my last minute friend, who would not have known what you were doing, Yes, for you too I say this THANK YOU, and this "A-DIEU" to commend you to the God in whose face I see yours.* I explained to Father T.B. how I understood Christian's testament. He listened with tears in his eyes, then he said: yes, that's right.

- It all begins "*When an A-DIEU is envisaged*": that is to say, in the perspective of a departure and when God alone arranges it.
- He continues: "*I should like, when the time comes, (...) to forgive with all my heart the one who would strike me down*".
- Having arrived at the moment of death: "*my most insistent curiosity will then be set free. To immerse my gaze in that of the Father to contemplate with him His children of Islam as He sees them (...), filled with the Gift of the Spirit, whose secret joy will always be to establish communion and to refashion the likeness...*"
- But this contemplation comes before the moment of death. This is why Christian can see in *my last minute friend, who would not have known what he was doing* (his assassin) the very face of God: *GOD in whose face I see yours.*
- It all ends when forgiveness has brought about transformation and re-fashioned the likeness. God the Father and man the brother have been met together. Profound mystery of love, prolongation of the Love of Christ who died saying: Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.

At 12:30 we left for Les Glycines (Diocesan Cultural Center) to lunch with Monsignor, the Nuncio and Cardinal Arinze. I took advantage of this visit to see again with Father A.G. (Director of the Center) the room where they are storing several things belonging to the monastery: the Prior's archives, the personal papers of the Brothers, holy pictures, the crozier, the chalice and paten, etc. I took a certain number of things that were in Fr. Christophe's three boxes to send to his brothers and his two sisters: an envelope with photos of the family, a journal in memory of his ordination, a New Testament ((TOB), two Jerusalem Bibles (pocket edition and large size). At 14:00 we returned to the Diocesan House.

At 14:50 they came again to take us in the armored van of the French Ambassador to the military hospital, to pick up and accompany the seven catafalques to the Sanctuary of Notre Dame d'Afrique. We went there together: Fr. Amédée, Dom Armand, Father G.N. and myself. We were there in 20 minutes. The Colonel was waiting for us and received us very cordially. We went together to the department of forensic medicine. A guard of thirty military cadets, with shining helmets, were in the act of putting the coffins into four yellow ambulances. Everything was done with great respect and dignity. At 15:35, we left for the Sanctuary accompanied by an impressive security guard (3 motorcycles, 3 patrol cars, 2 military vans). They had taken care

to stop the traffic along the whole of the way. During the 25 minutes' drive, Fr. Amédée piously recited his rosary. At 16:00 we entered the Sanctuary. A great number of journalists from different periodicals, radio and TV were waiting for us. There was great emotion while our seven Brothers were transferred inside the Basilica. A few minutes later, Cardinal Lustiger and three French Bishops arrived, one of whom was Msgr. Duval, president of the Episcopal Conference of France, and nephew of Cardinal Duval. In the sacristy I found Fr. Jean-Pierre and Father R.F. who had come from Fès and Tibhirine respectively. Since the civil authorities (five ministers representing the Algerian government) had arrived a little early, we decided to begin the funeral Mass for Cardinal Duval and our seven Brothers immediately. It was 16:40. The eight coffins were in the sanctuary; on each one had been placed a large wreath of flowers and a good sized photo. Cardinal Duval and the monks were re-united once more; so it had not been in vain that the Cardinal had prevented the closure of the monastery by the Order at the beginning of the 60s. Cardinal Arinze, the Pope's delegate, presided at the celebration; Msgr. Teissier and Msgr. Duval assisted him, one on his right and one on his left, immediately followed by myself and Dom Armand, then by Fr. Amédée and Fr. Jean-Pierre. It was a moment of great emotion when we saw on the altar the chalice and paten of the monastery, a chalice and paten decorated with coral coming from Kabyle. The celebration proceeded according to plan, except that the message of President Chirac on the occasion of the death of the Brothers was replaced by a telegram of condolence from the Pope on the death of Cardinal Duval.

At 18:00, everything was over. Many people, with tears in their eyes, approached us to greet us. One of the security guards at the military hospital (a Muslim) shook my hand very hard, saying: "the monks are our brothers too". Many asked our forgiveness for what had happened. For my part, all I could say was Thank You. I met the Argentinian Ambassador, Gerónimo Cortes-Funes, college companion of my elder brother. What a small world! Armand and I blessed the remains of our Brothers one last time, and about 19:00 we left to return to the Diocesan House.

About 19:30, Armand went to the French Embassy for a meal with the ecclesiastical authorities. I asked him to give my excuses to the Ambassador. I preferred to stay at the house and dine with Fr. Amédée, Fr. Jean-Pierre and the family of Fr. Christophe. After the meal, I gave the Lebreton family what I had brought from Les Glycines that had belonged to Christophe. The day had been long and filled with restrained emotions.

Monday, 3 June

At 7:30, we celebrated the Eucharist, Cardinal Lustiger presiding. We were about thirty persons: the little remnant of the diocese of Algiers. Before the last blessing, he thanked all present for "the faith of this little local church which keeps alive and sustains the decadent faith of old Europe".

After the Mass, I asked Fr. Amédée if it would be possible to go to Les Glycines to get the boxes containing Christophe's personal effects. I would like his family to be able to see the contents and take the more personal souvenirs. After lunch, I met Father T.B. again and he gave me the account I had asked for two days ago. There were 6 pages describing the experience of the night of 27 March and the following day at the monastery. I reminded Fr. Amédée and Fr. Jean-Pierre that I was still waiting for their own account of the events of that night.

Between 15:00 and 16:30, I was able to have a good meeting with Fathers Amédée and Jean-Pierre. There were various practical points to be dealt with and some decisions to be made. We went over the programme for the celebration of the burial at the monastery. Was it possible to ensure a presence at Tibhirine for 2 or 3 years in view of coming back if the situation in the country returns to normal? I offered them the necessary financial help to seek in Medea a house for MM and his family, if he would like it. I reminded Father Jean-Pierre that as superior *ad nutum* of the community, he would have to come to Rome for the next General Chapter. Finally,

we spoke of Fr. Michel, a Dominican Father, who has asked for a *transitus* to our Order and will enter at Fès.

About 17:00, another meeting, this time with Claire and Fr. Amédée, to go through Christophe's personal papers. Élisabeth and Xavier arrived a little later. It wasn't easy to distinguish between: study and conference notes, personal journal, poems, etc. There were also a great number of letters received which we decided to burn out of respect for the persons who had sent them. We put all the photos together to send to Madame Lebreton. For myself, I took a personal journal, written in a large notebook. On the first page we read: "prayer notebook begun this Sunday 8/08/1993 at Tibhirine." The last entry in this journal is of 19 March 1996, a week before the abduction:

St. Joseph - with Bruno and Father J.C. who arrived yesterday. Anniversary of my consecration to Mary. Yes, I continue to choose you, Mary, with Joseph, in the communion of all the saints, and I receive you from the hands of Jesus with the poor and sinners. With the beloved disciple, I take you into my home. Near you, I am: offered. In the garden this morning, a good discussion with MS on marriage. I was happy to preside at the Eucharist. / I almost heard the voice of Joseph - inviting me to sing with him and the child Ps. 100: My song is of mercy and justice... I will walk in the way of perfection. O, when, Lord will you come? I will walk with blameless heart.

Among numerous poems, there is one very significant one in the light of all that happened. Unfortunately, it bears no date, but it isn't difficult to situate it approximately in time. It says this:

testament

*my body is for the earth
but please
no preservative
between it and me*

*my heart is for life
but please
no affectation
between it and me*

*my hands for work
will be folded
quite simply*

*as for my face
let it be bare
so as not to hinder a kiss*

*and my gaze
let it SEE*

P.S.

thanks

At the end of the meal, we met with Élisabeth, Claire and Xavier to explain to them certain circumstances surrounding the discovery and identification of the remains of the Brothers. After a brief introduction, I asked Dom Armand to speak. It was very painful both for us and for them.

The pain united us even more profoundly. We ended by praying together in silence in the chapel on the first floor.

Tuesday, 4 June

The day began early. Before 7:00, we telephoned Christophe's mother: we thought we would console her, but it was we who were consoled... I told her she had now 4,500 new sons and daughters. She replied: "I feel I am truly the mother of them all". I am sure that the mothers of our seven Brothers, living or dead, in heaven or on earth, are all now saying the same thing.

At 7:30, the Ambassador came to fetch us in his armored car and we were driven to the airport. There were: Monsignor, Élisabeth, Claire, Xavier, Amédée, Jean-Pierre, Armand and myself. We were going to the monastery, but without knowing the route we were to take. There was a great turnout of security guards at the airport. At 9:00, all of us, with 6 members of the guard, boarded a military plane which, at the end of a 30 minutes' flight, left us at the air Base of Ain Oussera, some 120 km south of Medea. A helicopter was to have flown us to Medea, but the bad weather prevented it. A little before 10:00 we left for the monastery with an escort of more than 12 vanloads of armed soldiers. A helicopter flew above our convoy during the entire first part of the journey.

We arrived at midday. The ambulances with the mortal remains of our brothers were already there. A day humid and grey: all nature seemed to be weeping for sorrow. A great display of police and military when we got to Medea and still more at the monastery. Our little group of nine went to the church where PH and Father R.F. were awaiting us. The coffins were carried by about thirty military cadets, all with great respect and dignity. Behind closed doors and in the most complete intimacy, I presided over an extremely simple liturgy: a few words of welcome, a song (Remember Jesus Christ), the prayer in the form of litany (You who sanctified by the water of baptism our Brothers Christian, Luc, Christophe, Michel, Célestin, Bruno and Paul, give them the fullness of the life of the son of God...), a reading from the Gospel (Lk 23,33-43), sprinkling with holy water and incensing, concluding prayer. Xavier served as thurifer. Armand and Élisabeth took some photos. Then we opened the doors once again and the cadets entered to take the mortal remains and carry them to the community cemetery.

The seven graves had been prepared. The coffins were placed each one in front of his grave: from right to left, Christian first, then the others in order of monastic seniority. Father Jean-Pierre addressed a few words of thanks full of hope to all those present - neighbours and authorities. Then the Bishop and Father G.N. spoke in Arabic. I said a last prayer and they began to lower the coffins into the graves. It was already 13:15. Monsignor cast the first shovelful of earth into the grave of Michel and I into that of Christophe: a group of neighbours continued the task... At that very moment the sun appeared. The coffins disappeared under the earth, and we disappeared beneath the arms, the kisses and the condolences of innumerable neighbours of the monastery, who, at the same time thanked us for having buried the monks here. At 13:45, it was all over. We stopped briefly in a room of the monastery where the Prefect of Medea had prepared tables with coffee, tea and baskets of fruit. Taking advantage of the general dispersion, I made a rapid visit round the monastery. With the idea of sending it to Madame Lebretton, I took a Christ in olive wood which hung on the wall of the library. In my heart a single phrase was resounding: "We will not leave our dead alone, we shall come back!" At 14:00 we left, without leaving...

The return journey was slightly different. By car as far as the military base of Berouaghia, thence by helicopter to the air base of Ain Oussera, and finally by armed forces' plane to Algiers. At 16:45, we were back at the Diocesan House.

At 17:00, we celebrated a Eucharist with the prayers and readings of Easter Day: the texts of Easter expressed our feelings well. Father Jean-Pierre presided. At the end of the Mass I once more met Géronimo Cortes-Funes, The Argentinian Ambassador, who had come to present his condolences; we spent a long time together discussing various subjects, religious, political and social.

After the meal, Jean-Pierre and Armand met with the families in order to share with them what they had experienced during the day. For my part, I called Dom Étienne of Bellefontaine who told me that the mother and sister of Christian were there; I asked him to convey my most affectionate remembrance to them.

Wednesday, 5 June

At 6:30, Xavier left, and after the Mass, at 7:30, Élisabeth and Claire. Incredible how the "Pasch" of Christophe and the Brothers of Tibhirine has united us to the Lebreton family and to the family of each of the Brothers.

It was already 9:00 when I met with Jean-Pierre to speak of the future of Fès. It is clear that the community at Fès is the community of Atlas, at present living at Fès. The average age of the community is very high and the health not too good, but the spirit is excellent. As for the future, what seems certain is the following: return to Tibhirine as soon as possible; the need for volunteer brothers to come from other communities of the Order; perhaps it may be necessary to leave the present residence of Fès, for lack of vital space. In order to help the community materially and spiritually, perhaps it might be good to name a small *ad hoc* commission composed of Fr. Jean-Pierre, an Abbot and a Permanent Councillor.

At about 14:30, Father J.C. (parish priest of Notre-Dame de la Nativité since 1971), a great friend of the community and "father" of Christophe's monastic vocation, came to greet me. He told me what had happened during his last visit to the monastery on 19 March. To his great surprise, the Brothers had prepared a triple celebration for him: his 79th birthday (15 March), his patron saint (Saint Joseph), and his golden jubilee of priesthood. For this reason, they gave him a present of the *Book of Revelations* of Julian of Norwich (Paris: Cerf, 1992). On the first page the Brothers had fixed the seal of the monastery, and around the seal, in red letters, these words: "All shall be well. Alleluia." These words ("All shall be well") are a theme constantly repeated by the mystic. During the two months of the Brothers' captivity, the Father wondered how the meaning of these words could be understood more concretely: how could everything be well? The twofold reply is obvious: in giving glory to God by a death accepted and offered, or by living and glorifying God by the daily living of the monastic life. Today there is only one response. And the good Father added: "Never in all my life have I experienced such peace and felt so close to God as now; Tibhirine is a grace for all of us, Christians in Algeria and Algerian people, time will show this more and more. We needed martyrs, now we have them." Later he showed me the text of Christophe's homily for the feast of Saint Joseph, most probably his last homily.

With Armand's help I prepared three letters. The first was for the Brothers of Fès, to encourage them and to clarify their present situation as an autonomous community of the Order. The second for the Minister of the Interior, to thank him for all the good services he rendered during the course of the week: visas, transport, security, etc. The third for the French Ambassador, to thank him for his untiring devotion during the two preceding months. It seems important to me to meet the human person that exists under the official titles and institutional functions.

After the evening meal, Monsignor, Jean-Pierre, Armand and I met together again. The principal questions were: The upkeep of the buildings, the safety of MM (I shared with Monsignor what we had spoken about with MM), the situation of the community of Fès (I gave him a copy of the letter I had written for the Brothers of Fès), the archives of the community and the personal

writings of the monks which were at Les Glycines (I suggested that everything should remain there as long as this was possible and necessary; these things belong to this local church too). We prayed Compline with Monsignor in his chapel and thus ended our last day in Algeria. Our departure was scheduled for the next morning, God willing.

Thursday, 6 June

At 6:30, we began to say goodbye to everyone, to the Diocesan House. It is unbelievable that such strong links could have been forged in such a short time. The blood of our martyred Brothers has united us profoundly with this church which is experiencing joys and sufferings in Algeria: they are our Brothers, but also their brothers, their martyrs, but also our martyrs. And please God they will be the last martyrs to shed their blood for a long time.

Father P.L. drove us to the airport escorted by the bodyguard that had been assigned to us the day we arrived. At 10:08, Flight 2024, Air Algeria, took off for Rome. During the flight, all sorts of faces and images passed through my imagination. We had experienced so many things. I asked our seven Martyrs: what is your message for the Order? I can read the reply in their lives:

- they followed Jesus to the end, in the absolute radicalism of the Gospel.
- they were launched into the mystery to the point of being totally transformed by Him.
- they lived together, they died together and they went together into eternal Life.
- they were in close communion with the Church, universal and local.
- they were in profound solidarity with the men and women of today.
- they discerned the signs of the times and contemporary challenges.
- they have enriched our patrimony from a determined cultural context.
- they sealed with their blood their openness and engagement vis-à-vis interreligious dialogue.

At 12:30, local time, we landed at Fiumicino Airport where Father André was waiting for us.

Bernardo Olivera
Abbot General