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ORDO
CISTERCIENSIVM S.O.

ABBAS GENERALIS

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OUR BROTHERS OF ATLAS - III
Radiant Witnesses of Hope: Your Story and Ours

Very dear Brothers and Sisters,

Three days after the martyrdom of our seven Brothers I received a letter from Dom Ignace Gillet, our former Abbot General. In this letter concerning the recent events, Dom Ignace wrote : "*In our monasteries, too, there seems to be a current of new life...and I myself clearly sense that I am not the same as before.*" These words were written by a venerable monk of 95 who knows the Order as few of us do, so they carry a very special weight and significance.

There is no denying that a powerful current of witnessing to the Gospel has passed through the Order during recent months: a living stream that gives life, encourages, awakens, stimulates us and carries us back to our first love. I too have felt shaken up and brought to new life. I can say the same thing as Dom Ignace: I sense that I am not the same as before. I'm 50 years older and 103 years younger...

In this letter I wish to return to the grace which has come to us through our Brothers, our seven witnesses in him who is *the* Witness, our mediators in the one Mediator. Going back over the events will help us recognize the goodness and power of the one Lord of history, and will help to convert our hearts to be like his.

Let us go back, then, over the years. Let us let the Lord speak to us through the facts and read the story in the light of faith, so that it becomes transparent to us as Salvation History. Let our Brothers speak : those who are still with us on our pilgrim journey and those who wait for us in God's Kingdom. We will let them tell and explain what happened.

A NECESSARY PROLOGUE
A Story that did not begin yesterday

On July 5, 1830 the French fleet landed and conquered by force of arms the territory of Algeria. Almost immediately it was annexed to France. A great number of French colonists emigrated to Algerian territory. Thirteen years later, in 1843, a group of twelve monks from Aiguebelle settled at Staouéli, west of Algiers, and thus the Cistercian adventure began anew in Africa.

Our Lady of Atlas was founded in 1934 by the Abbey of Our Lady of Liberation. After several unsuccessful attempts, it was permanently established in Tibhirine as a daughter house of Aiguebelle.

In 1938 Ferhat Abbas founded the "Algerian Popular Union". It was a movement that aimed at independence based on Algeria's Arabic heritage. Five years later, in 1943, Ferhat Abbas asks the French Governor for recognition of an independent and sovereign Algerian state. France's refusal provides the occasion for open opposition. In 1945, after the Second World War, France tries to blot out any attempt for Algerian independence.

Thus, starting in 1954, there is open war against France. The Algerians are led by Ben Bellá, Ait Ahmed and Mohammed Kedir. In July, 1959, Father Mathieu and Brother Luc are kidnapped, and then set free eight days later.

The signing of Algeria's independence took place on March 18, 1962. Its official proclamation came less than four months later, on July 3rd. On September 8th Ben Bellá, of the National Liberation Front (FLN), was elected as the country's President.

The 1965 chronicle of the Abbey of Atlas tells how the previous year it had almost been decided to close the monastery. The General Chapter of January 1964 had issued the verdict that: "The Most Reverend Father General and the Assembly would be happy if a monastery of the Order would offer to take upon itself the refounding of Atlas. If this does not happen, the closing of the house will take place according to the principle already decided by the Definitory." His Excellency Archbishop Duval persistently opposes this decision. His trust knows no limits. "The desert will bloom again," he had written to the Abbot of Timadeuc, who had decided to send some monks to the African Abbey. On October 29, 1964, while visiting the community, the Archbishop was able to update his statement: "The desert has already bloomed."

On June 19, 1965, Ben Bellá is deposed by a *coup d'état* and a Revolutionary Council takes over, headed by Colonel Bumedien, who is later elected President. The National Charter is proclaimed on June 27, 1976 : Algeria is a socialist country following the Islamic religion and speaking Arabic. Bumedien dies on December 27, 1978. On January 31, 1979, the Congress of the FLN elects Benjedid Chadli as President, who is re-elected in 1984 by a general election.

The last ten years have seen an increase in fundamentalist groups and in those discontented with the National Charter of 1976. The way is open for a plurality of political parties and the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) is successful in the administrative elections of June 1990. Seeing this success, the FIS asks for general political elections which would take place on June 27, 1991. Civil disorder delays the elections until December 26th. In the first round the FIS obtains 24% of the votes. The Army intervenes to suspend the second round, which would have taken place on June 16, 1992. President Chadli is deposed and power is assumed by the High Commission of State (HCE) presided over by Mohamed Boudiaf. The FIS is declared illegal and all political activity is suspended. Now that they are obliged to live clandestinely, the most radical group of the FIS, the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) begins an uninterrupted chain of terrorist acts. On June 29, 1992, Boudiaf is assassinated.

A NOT UNEXPECTED CHRISTMAS VISIT

From Birth to Birth

It was January 17, 1994. Among the many letter that came that morning was a big envelope on which were some Algerian stamps and the small handwriting of Father Christian. I open the envelope and read:

Dear Father and brother Bernardo, herewith a whole dossier to complete the "events". It was difficult to get in touch with the Generalate to tell you these things. And everything happened very quickly, including our own community "preferences". For there was, after the "visit" of Christmas night, a perfectly understandable reaction of immediate "flight". I was perhaps best placed to know that if there was a threat, it fell first of all on me (I was, and am, the "pass-word": a really lucky find!). I do not think that, in the immediate future the community as a whole runs the risk of the atrocious fate of our friends of Tamesguida. But how can we not keep the image of them in our minds?

Now there is a real calm... a peace that comes from the Child and his Mother. With this hope, too, that the neighbours attach to our presence "between the two".

Along with the hand-written letter, are also several other documents with different titles:

- *Chronology of events*
- *Situation...on January 5, 1994 (at 6 A.M.)*
- *Community Votes - December 31, 1993 (Confidential)*
- *Br. Christian de Chergé, Prior of the Monastery of Tibhirine, to the Honourable Prefect of Medea, December 30, 1993.*
- *Report of Br. Christophe*

I immediately understand that something important has happened, something we very much hoped would not happen. I pick up the telephone and speak personally with Christian. His voice is peaceful. He explains what happened. I sense that something new has started at Our Lady of Atlas. After speaking with him I return to reading the documents:

Chronology of events...

- * *October 1993: three officers of the French consulate are taken as hostages. Released, they are bearers of a distinct threat from the GIA (Armed Islamic Group) aimed at all foreigners living in Algeria: "they have one month to leave the country". Many ambassadors take the warning very seriously (German, Belgian, British...) France does not wish to risk having no presence in Algeria, but advises prudence.*
- * *17 November 1993: brother Christian is summoned to the Cabinet of the Wali (Prefect). They suggest a police guard. He absolutely refuses any armed presence. He merely agrees no longer to open during the night.*
- * *1st December 1993: the delay allowed to foreigners expires. Very soon a Spaniard, a Frenchman, a Russian woman (of mixed blood), a Briton... are assassinated.*
- * *14 December 1993: at nightfall, 14 (out of 19) ex-Yugoslavians (mainly Croatians) from an hydraulic plant installed in Tamesguida (14 km as the crow flies from the monastery, under our windows) have their throats slit by a commando force estimated at fifty persons. Two miraculously escape the slaughter. The victims were picked out for being Christians and Croatians no doubt with reference to the present conflict with Bosnia. We used to receive them each year on Christmas and Easter night. It is a real shock for the community.*
- * *19 December 1993: brother Christian is summoned once more to the Wilaya (Prefecture). An hour-long interview in the office of the Wali, who is anxious to take security measures to protect the community after the massacre of Tamesguida. He suggests that we should "take a holiday in France", proposes that we retire to a "protected hotel" in Medea for the night at the expense of the Wilaya, more arms, etc.... Means not very appropriate, especially to the religious state. A feeling that the danger is not going to get any less... that any provisional departure in these conditions would run the risk of being without possibility of return; that the neighbouring people would not understand. We agree to improve the telephone line (a new number is installed the same day)... and to be attentive to indications coming from round about. With no illusions, we lock ourselves in more securely and earlier. We are aware also of experiencing somewhat exceptional conditions of monastic conversation. We are in agreement that we should avoid what the Wali called "collective suicide". We reiterate among ourselves our reasons for remaining, with the realization of being at the junction between two groups who are in confrontation here and evidently to some extent everywhere in the West and Near East.*
- * *24 December 1993: "They" are there, about 7.15 p.m., three inside our walls (three others outside), armed, without being directly threatening. They burst into the guest-house where our parish priest G.N.*

and three African students are with the guest-master Br. Paul. They demand to see "the pope of the place". One of them comes into the cloister and tries to assemble the brothers. Two of them flee without being seen and will remain hidden until Vigils, fearing the worst for the others. Brother Christian goes to the guest-house. He has a long interview with the one in charge, after having pointed out that arms are coming for the first time into a "house of peace" where they have no place. The chief wishes to reassure us of his intentions, in the immediate and for the future, on condition that...1/...2/...3/... Brother Christian argues. "You have no choice". They have not realized that it was Christmas. They are confused. The aim is clearly an attempt to compromise us... In fact, it was impossible to warn the authorities. Obviously, this is a rather special Christmas.

* 26 December 1993: community meeting. A majority of the brothers are in favour of an immediate departure. They doubt that there is any time left to make provision for preserving the future. We are unanimous in thinking that it is not moral to satisfy the 3rd demand. An engagement that would cost the Church dear. However, one of the Christmas visitors pointed out clearly that the GIA made a distinction between "Christians" and "foreigners"...

* 27 December 1993: visit from our Archbishop, Father Teissier. In situating our community among the others, he underlines the effect which our sudden departure would have on all the Christians in this trial. He suggests something "progressive" which would provide for the transitions with the surrounding area and would safeguard the future. But he stops short of insisting on the decision.

* 28 December 1993 : the community comes round to the bishop's plan. Three brothers depart provisionally for reasons of anxiety or studies. The others will prepare for a departure... In the evening, the bishop chose to inform the Wali of something...

* 29 December 1993 : brother Christian summoned to the Wilaya. A firm letter from the Wali recalling the necessity of security measures, and disclaiming his responsibility. He requires an answer.

* 30 December 1993 : the community's reply to the Wali.

* 31 December 1993 : we take a series of conventual votes to try to clarify the community paths of decision and of the future. A very strong consensus for a refusal of "collaboration", for a "progressive" formula reserving even the possibility of remaining if there is no obstacle and in our ignorance of what the promised "envoy" might ask. We should also like to remain together, and to provide for a return to Algeria. Fes as a mid-way place.

The sheet entitled, *Situation on January 5, 1994*, attracts my attention. I read: 1/, 2/, 3/, 4/, 5/, 6/ and come to paragraphs 7/ and 8/:

7/ In community we have first of all lived through an experience of profound communion, moment after moment, receiving the words of our prayer and the things of the regular life as a true gift of God dictating to us what we should say and do, here and now. Br. Luc, doctor and senior, has a fundamental role!

8/ For several weeks, therefore, just six of us are going to remain here. The season is more favourable to this reduced number. The guest-house is temporarily closed. We can count on the support of the associates who are more directly linked to the management of the property under the supervision of Brother Christophe. On the material level, we are going to have to tighten our belts in order to make ends meet, like our neighbours...

My interest and understanding of the situation grow as I read. I feel as if I were myself at Tibhirine. Now it is Christophe speaking to me as I read his *Report* :

This Christmas has not been like any other.

It is still charged with meaning.

Like Mary, we ponder these things that have happened to us. We continue the conversation she began in her heart.

The meaning pierces us like a sword. The Word takes on this community of body and blood to speak Himself here, today.

We have just finished our community retreat with Fr. Sanson, S.J. He had points for examen and points for prayer. And each one of us, no doubt, has made a few good resolutions.

I had none other than yours: the resolve of a committed love. Each day I receive it... I take it. I eat it. I drink it... This is my body given for you. This is the cup of my blood poured out for you and for the multitude.

I am resolutely Living through Him, in Him, with Him.

We are in an epiclesis situation.

I am learning some things... especially that the school of the Lord's service does not go on Christmas vacation. The Child is our Teacher. I am learning what it means to be Church: the great happiness of being physically held in this body which speaks the Presence in the here and now.

THE LOVE WHO COMES

Present with us that night were G., our parish priest and three African students. There were those men and women from Croatia and Bosnia who had come for the feast of Christmas, '91.

I am learning what it means to be Church: I see her adorned as a Bride bedecked for her Spouse, the Suffering Servant.

Fernand was also present, a friend from Savoy.

There we were, each one of us, and the events which have brought us truly close together, without erasing any of the differences. In the morning we admitted that it would be idiotic to try to reach a consensus. Each of us has experienced profound things. Each of us gives them an interpretation. Each tries to integrate them. And there is also a "we" who journey together, progressing in wisdom and grace (!?!). We have been dislodged, we have been led to a place where we could never have gone despite all our religious training.

...The Mystery of Faith is deep... of more loving fidelity. Yes, I am moved at being a member of this body, which has neither lustre nor beauty.

Henri Teissier, our pastor, came to visit us. His first act was to preside over our Sacrifice of Praise. Afterwards, we listened, we allowed ourselves to take in the measure of the anxiety of a shepherd whose sheep are threatened. He left again, leaving us free in an obedience to which there was no obvious solution. We also had to learn obedience together, without prejudice, respecting the conscience of each person.

I'm learning this also, and it is a point on which much has been written, and I have also had my own ideas: it is the question of monks.

I'm learning that there is first of all, the Church, and we belong to this body of Christ. I know that we are not better people, nor are we heroes, nor indeed are we anything extraordinary. I feel this very strongly here at Tibhirine. And yet, there is something unique in our manner of being Church: of responding to events, of waiting on them, of living them out.

It is a certain awareness, as if we were responsible not for doing something, but for being something here, in response to Truth, in response to Love. We envisage eternity? There is a sense of that. Our Lady of Atlas, "a sign on the mountain," signum in montibus, as our coat of arms declares.

And I see that our particular mode of existence as cenobitic monks, well, it resists, it holds fast, and it sustains you. To elaborate slightly:

The Office. The words of the psalms resist, confront the situation of violence, of anguish, of untruth, of injustice. Yes, there are enemies. We cannot force ourselves to say too quickly that we love them without injuring the memory of victims whose numbers increase each day. Holy God. Strong God. Come quickly to our aid. Quick, help us!

And then we receive words of encouragement, of consolation, words that give us hope, and it is there that reading the Scriptures is vital. There is meaning. It must be received, acknowledged... And being acknowledged, it is accomplished. You who come! And this is full of meaning for us. It is being accomplished: Love in the shape of a Cross.

There is a person whose role is clearly delineated in the Rule of St. Benedict. It is the Abbot. Yes, we believe that he holds the place of You who give your life. This role is held by one of us. He has received the singular and, when all is said and done, secular title of Mr. Christian. It is the password. The word of Passover. This gentleman is the link with Mary. "I alone will pass." Filial and fraternal solitude close to the mother. Difficult mission. It weighs upon one, upon each one of us. We are a little overburdened, a little worn down. We go to bed earlier! and yes, it is the work of faith!

Monks. We are in the process of becoming a little more truly monks according to the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, and this is spiritual inculturation. The symbiosis with our neighbours, with the country, has great benefits for us : it gives us the vision to see. E.g., the look of A. when night comes and he returns home, leaving us until tomorrow, inch'Allah! And M.A. trimming an apple tree with P.H. yesterday, feast of the Epiphany. Or the meeting with the associates, to mark the New Year. M.H. taking up his new responsibility as deputy chief of agriculture.

Pardon me, but there is still something else. It is about eating and drinking together. Ah, the french fries of toubib....delivered only by order...like honey from the rock! Brother Luc? Yes, he is very exposed. On the 1st. January, 1994, which inaugurated the year and month of his 80th birthday, in the refectory we listened to the cassette he is keeping on hand for the day of his burial: Edith Piaf singing: "No, I have no regrets !"

Re-reading Christophe's *Diary* today, I relive with him his experience of that Christmas eve:

[25/12/93] Christmas.

A dark night and the morning Star lights up each face. We are all alive.

And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it.

It is enough to stand firm in the power of becoming children of God born here of God.

What has happened to us ?

You, the one who is above all

the unexpected who reveals our thirst to us : come, oh

Behold, I come quickly.

Taken up in the Coming, it remains for us to follow the current of grace...

And a few days later, the last day of this year 1993, Christophe writes :

[31/12/93]

In your hands, Mary

In your hands, Church of Algeria

I give myself to Crucified love

*that he might profess me
well-beloved
consecrated in your
I am
the Way, the Truth, the Life*

On 15 January, Christophe asked himself and replied:

[15/01/94] 15th

Where is fidelity ? Who is the one who obeys ? The one who says and declares categorically and sure of himself : I will never leave this place.

Or the other who has said : I would like to go, and who is still here...

*persevering in your teaching (the Gospel here today)
in the monastery until death*

(which came close and is still threatening)

*sharing in your sufferings oh Christ our Passover
by patience*

in order to merit

to be in your kingdom

"consortes"

new Eucharists

other Christs

In the monastery until death, yes, if and as you wish, but not apart from a living fidelity to your teaching : what the Spirit is saying at this time in the Church.

And the next day he continued his meditation :

[16/01/94] Sunday

In the night, I rendered on your part the infinite service of saying : I forgive you.

Is it that I know that my body is for you and you for my body.

*I cannot say whether I am united with you, I simply weep and beg never to be separated from you,
the temple of Breath in me*

coming from the Father, given by you;

and I do not belong to myself : Mary is in me the guarantee of

that detachment which in her was total, radical. Close to her : I am. Then I shall be able to glorify you by my body.

Christian, with whom I had a long meeting this morning, tells me of his refusal to imagine his death as being able to be imputed to those he loves here. He remembers the prayer of brother Luc during one mass : Lord, grant that I may be able to die without hatred in my heart... and G.B. taking to himself the words of Jesus : no-one takes my life but it is I who give it. And G.N. : 3 minutes to say yes.

I came to talk about what happened on the evening of the 24th : which was experienced as first a flight, then a waiting, then a coming up from the abyss.

Where have you led me. Perhaps for myself, it is to accept to live. But could you ask me to accept the death of my brothers.

Now Fathers Jean-Pierre and Amédée take up the story. I combine here their two reports to make it easier to read. Only a few details are omitted. The months and years that have passed enable them to be more objective, but do not take away the emotion and passion from what they experienced.

Most Reverend and dear Father,

In this letter [30 July 1996], I send you the narrative of the visit of Sayat-Attya and his group on 24 December 1993 to Tibhirine, as I experienced it and as I remember it. This event marked a turning

point in our community life : I see it well expressed in the text of Br. Christophe which appeared in *Seven Lives for Algeria and for God*.

*Returning from work
In front of the red tractor and its rather noisy weariness,
When the first Door opened,
I committed myself confident in the openness offered in your faith.
I entered into the peace of your smile
and I loved the glory of the Word on your face.
It is so beautiful, it is so simple, it is you who have spoken :
"It is like this in the heart,
That is to say, we must open the doors very wide".
Marvelling, I contemplated the Gospel of God.
The book between us was open, wide.
When the second Door opened,
first of all I trembled before this infinity so close,
accessible and poor as a stable.
Showing me the inside of the house,
you let me into the secret, this wound towards the inside.
Inviting me to enter further in, you were offering me the asylum of a Kingdom.
The future between us is a great open silence...*

Excuse me, Father, I had to write everything. I could not stop half-way. This poem expresses so many things, especially when one re-reads it after the events. I didn't know it : it is the first time I have read it. But you could say that when he wrote it Christophe was already announcing what would happen to him. There are these mysterious Doors written with a capital D... they follow each other chronologically as two passages opening onto the future... There is the verb "to tremble" which describes a first reaction, followed immediately by another of complete willingness and offering... This is very beautiful and says many things to me... There is the ending : "Inviting me to enter further in, you were offering me the asylum of a Kingdom"... This is what happened... he sees it, he has now entered in... "The future between us is a great open silence..."

I embrace you, Father...

Br. Jean-Pierre

Night of Christmas Eve : 24 December 1993, at Tibhirine

[Fr. Jean-Pierre]

Context

The GIA group of the fundamental Islamists had announced that by 1st. December 1993 all foreigners should have left the country, or else they would be put to death. 12 Croatians had just had their throats slit in the neighbouring village of Tamesguida, in their work encampment. This took place on 14 December, towards 10.30 p.m. Throats slit because they were Christians, in revenge for the Muslims maltreated in Bosnia. The Testament of Christian is situated in this context since it was begun on 1st December 1993 and ended on 1st January 1994. He describes well the state of mind in which we then found ourselves, uncertainty, apprehension, a certain anxiety... What is going to happen ? "It could be today" says Christian in his Testament. It is true that we knew that the mountain men were not far away and could raid us at any moment.

24 December 1993, about 7 p.m.

The religious had just gone to bed after the Angelus bell. Compline is not in fact celebrated this evening, because Christmas Vigils are anticipated at 10.45 p.m. In the guest house, a group of three or four African students from the administrative Centre of Formation (C.F.A.) of Medea, had arrived with G.N. to participate at Midnight Mass. Br. Paul, guest-master at that time, was with them in the guest-house, in the refectory.

I myself, as sacristan, was occupied in the sacristy preparing for Christmas Vigils and Midnight Mass, while Fr. Célestin, preparing the chants, was busy at the notice board, at the end of the cloister near the chapel and the small door which opens onto the cloister garth. The other end of the garth gives onto the entrance door of the monastery.

From the sacristy, I hear through the open door a rapid and continuous whispering by Célestin... I wonder: "who is he talking to?" After a time I hear someone calling me by name from the cloister: "Jean-Pierre, come here..."! I turn round, and see, by the door, a young man in military uniform with a kalacnikov in his hand. He was standing there with Br. Célestin. I understood. I went towards him and said to him: "What is going on?"

This man had come in by the gate, seen light on the opposite side, crossed the garth and seen Br. Célestin near the notice board. How had Célestin reacted? He must have been scared to find himself suddenly in the presence of an armed man, and begun to speak in a low voice. When I asked "what is going on?", the man, who couldn't have known much French, didn't answer me; he was mainly interested in Br. Célestin. I retraced my steps to get on with my work. Then I carried the tray with cloths, chalice and cruets in the direction of the chapel to prepare the Altar. The man called out: "Come here..." I told myself we had to obey, thinking he might well begin to shoot. I put down the tray and went towards him.

[Fr. Amédée]

After the evening Angelus which Brother Michel has just rung, I leave the chapel and go to the kitchen where I am in the habit of preparing each evening a good hot tisane of lime-blossom, picked from our trees, to help me to sleep. It is about 7.45 p.m. when I come out of the kitchen to go to my room through the cloister, since it is situated near that of Brother Luc in the large hall where he stores his numerous medicines in big white plastic boxes as they come.

Just in the cloister, near the small refectory bell, I suddenly notice Father Célestin behind a well-dressed armed soldier, preceded by Brother Paul, moving towards the gate to go out. I go up to them and ask Father Célestin in a low voice what this police officer wants. He answers: "You haven't seen, it's those men from the mountain". In fact, this one from the mountain turns round and says to me: "Everyone to the guest-house". Brother Paul, who is walking in front of me then says: "Where's Father Superior? they want to see him". Without stopping, thinking I have seen him passing, I say that he is already in the guest-house. In the courtyard of the porter's room, the "mountain man" takes me by the sleeve to drag me along. Sensing the tragedy that could result from a too-easy assembling of everyone in the guest-house, I am firmly resolved not to go there. I pretend to go with him, and go to close abruptly the entrance door of the monastery which is still wide open... no doubt those lying in wait outside are not far away. No reaction.

I make a half turn and re-enter the cloister by the big iron gate near the porter's room. I close it... turning round, I come face to face with Father Christian. I immediately tell him that an armed group is awaiting him in the guest-house. "I'm well aware of it", he says, "I'm in no hurry"... He must have been thinking of the first part of his Testament written on 1st December in Algiers at the Maison St-Augustin, while waiting to come and pick me up at the airport that evening, the very day on which the ultimatum of the GIA expired, rendering all foreigners in Algeria liable to death from that day. We both returned to Tibhirine, to the mercy of the first false barrage! (Nothing had happened). Hadn't he already written in that first part of his Testament which he would in fact finish on the 1st January 1994, after having reflected on this "visit of that night": "If it should happen one day...and it could be today...my life was given to God and to this country... I should like, when the time comes, to have a space of lucidity which would enable me to beg forgiveness of God and of my brother human beings..."

Then he went slowly towards the guest-house. I close the gate again, leaving only a tiny chink through which I could see what was happening, with all lights extinguished except those in the guest-house and the lamp at the entrance to the chapel.

Soon I see Father Christian returning, accompanied by a "montagnard" (Djebelli, whom our neighbours call "mountain people"). They are talking with no raising of voices, in an undertone, and they pause a moment in front of the stone statue of Our Lady (from the Rue du Bac, brought from Staouéli) which is at the entrance to our chapel.

I can see them well. They continue to speak for a long time, motionless except for the hands of the man which in the semi-darkness speak as much as he does, following the arab-berber custom and its use of gestures. I didn't know then that this was the terrible chief of the region, Sayat-Aftya, he who without doubt had given the order, a few days before, to slit the throats of our Croatian brothers... I also heard their conversation, without understanding it. I wait anxiously... and now the Djebelli ends by leaving quietly after having rounded up the two others who were in the guest-house.

[Fr. Jean-Pierre]

Brother Michel, who was in the kitchen preparing the hot drink for the guest-house after Midnight Mass, arrived in his turn and was invited to follow the man who led us in the direction of the porter's room. We didn't know what to think. Or rather, without admitting it, each one must have thought: "our turn has come". When we had reached the courtyard of the porter's room, Br. Paul crossed in front of us, running. He came from the guest-house where an armed group had got in and were demanding to see the superior. Br. Paul then went to look for Christian who was in his room. We then rejoined the group who were standing at the entrance to the guest-house: G.N., the Africans, and two armed men, one of whom was wearing a turban: This was Sayat-Aftya. We didn't know this at the time, but we had no doubt that these were the terrorists who had slit the Croats' throats.

Arrival of Christian

When he arrives, Christian cries out: "This is a house of peace, no-one has ever come in here carrying arms. If you want to talk with us, come in, but leave your arms outside. If that isn't possible, let us talk outside..." The chief draws Christian apart, half-way between the guest-house building and the small gate of the courtyard which opens on to the road. There they had a discussion, in the course of which Sayat-Aftya tried to impose several conditions, of which Christian gave us the details later.

During this time, we were talking with the other two "montagnards", standing in the recess of the guest-house door. It was G.N. chiefly who was their interlocutor; he knows arabic well. The subject of the encounter, by and large, was this: "We do not want this government, it is corrupt and irreligious. We must set up an Islamic government... You are religious, have no fear, we shall not harm you"...

Br.Ph., who has witnessed the scene from the kitchen passage, runs for safety, and drags off Fr. Christophe whom he meets, to go and hide in a large tank in the cellar next to the man-hole.

This lasted about a quarter of an hour. During this time, outside, in the street, it seems that another group of three men were on patrol. They would have had contact with some local youths who were there... The working classes at that time were on the whole favourable to the mountain people. When the chief's interview with Christian was over, they shook hands with us and withdrew. Certain ones among us felt some discomfort, thinking that those hands were perhaps the ones that had cut the throats of our Croatian brothers.

What did we do next ?

We had had a narrow escape. Br. Luc was sleeping peacefully in his room, not worrying about anything. So was another priest who had come to spend the night with us: he didn't suspect anything. G.N. and

Christian had a long talk in Christian's office. As for me, I went back to my preparations in the sacristy and chapel. Michel and Célestin certainly, too, each to his place. The two brothers coming out of their tank in the cellar, no longer hearing anything, expected to find us all with our throats cut... The Christmas night liturgy took place at the time and in the way that had been planned. But the atmosphere of prayer could not have been more profoundly marked by what had just occurred.

The purpose of this impromptu visit

As Christian explained to us after the interview he had with the chief. It appears in the three conditions required of us by the latter :

1. "You are rich", he says, "you must agree to give us money when we ask for it".
2. That the doctor will come and care for our wounded or sick.
3. That you give us medicines.

You are religious, you must help us in our struggle to set up an Islamic government. You will have to carry out what we demand of you ; you have no choice.

Christian's response...

"We are not rich. We work to earn our daily bread. We help the poor. As for sending Brother Luc into the mountains, it isn't possible, given his great age and above all his asthma. He will be able to care for the wounded and sick who come to the dispensary. There is no problem there, he cares without discrimination for all those in need and doesn't worry about who they are. As for medicines, he gives what is necessary to every sick person." Christian pointed out to this emir that we were going to prepare ourselves to celebrate the birth of Christ, the feast of Christmas... "In that case, excuse us", he replied, "we didn't know". On leaving, he left a password, since, said he, "we shall return".

[Fr. Amédée]

Father Christian returns to his office, followed by G.N. who was fortunately in the guest-house with three African students from the Administrative Centre of Formation, near Medea, come to participate in the concelebration of our Midnight Mass. Father Christian and G.N. begin to comment on the event. I hear them, I understand then the development of the intervention of the Djebelli, who the chief is, his demands ("You have no choice"...), that he stayed outside so as not to enter armed into the guest-house as Father Christian had refused him this. While another Djebelli talks with G.N. in the passage...

Now Father Célestin, very upset, also comes into the office. He told us he had had a gun pointed at him as he was on his knees getting out the music sheets from the little cupboard at the entrance to the chapel (by the cloister), that he had been made to go forward on his knees until this "mountain man", the most severe of all, allowed him to rise. He thought his last hour had come...

Knowing almost everything, I return to my room at the side, and passing in front of Brother Luc's room, I knock discreetly on his door, he is awake and answers in his gruff voice... tired by all the attention he has given to the sick during the day until evening : "What is it ? I enter his room quietly and tell him about this worrying visit, which has just ended without fuss, since the pitiless chief Sayat-Attya, learning from Father Christian in the courtyard that he had come on the very night of Christmas when we were about to celebrate the birth of Jesus, son of Mary, prince of Peace, had excused himself. But had said "We shall return ; give me a password for myself or my envoy". In face of Father Christian's hesitation, he had said : "Well, it shall be "Monsieur Christian", and gathering his men, two inside, three outside, they had departed... Brother Luc as usual shrugged his shoulders, not in the least disturbed... exteriorly !

I retired to my room beside his, to await the time for Vigils. It was almost 10 p.m. Without being able to sleep...

At 10.30, Father Christian rings the rising bell...Hearing the bells, Br. Ph. and Father Christophe who believed, they told us, that we had all had our throats cut, come out from their hiding-place and rejoin us in the chapel. At 10.45 p.m., entrusting ourselves to the divine Infant whose feast we are keeping and to Mary his Mother and ours, we sing Vigils.

[Father Jean-Pierre]

Consequences of this visit for the community

The first consequence was obviously that, day after day, we were expecting them again, with their demands. We had decided since then not to take part in any way in their combat, which had nothing to do with our monastic vocation nor our reason for being in Algeria. If they should arrive one day to hold us to ransom, we would give them a token sum to disembarass ourselves for the present of their begging, and we would leave the monastery immediately. We arranged as to how to react in the case of rapid departure without any warning, and how to know whether or not it would be necessary to take security measures... what would be our place of landfall or our rallying point in case of departure. We decided to reduce the number of religious for the time being : two were sent to France to visit their families and Ph., who was a student, has been sent to Algiers... Quite quickly options were consolidated which grouped together options that had been more or less scattered at an earlier time. One was that our vow of stability should keep us together for better or worse. More than simply in one place, it united us one to another ; in such a way that should an obligatory flight take place we should reassemble somewhere else with the intention of pursuing there our common vocation "together", giving priority to presence among the muslims... In the second place, this same vow takes on more and more the sign of a visible link with the Church of Algeria in trial and our Algerian neighbours. Our Lord and Master from whom we have received our mission in this place is the one to whom our vow of obedience binds us. We weren't obliged by the orders of the GIA. So long as the neighbouring people didn't make us feel their desire to see us leave, we would remain with them as in a contract of alliance and love, sharing their trial and trying to bear it with them. The choice to remain "unarmed" and "unprotected" by armed security measures or by fleeing to the town was quite soon made, as was a common choice to follow the Gospel ... "as lambs in the midst of wolves" with for our only arms, those of fidelity in charity and faith in the power of the Holy Spirit working in hearts... faith also in the good will of the people, seeing the trust we had placed in them in leaving ourselves, unarmed, in their hands, in such a dangerous spot. It was something of all this that we had been welding between ourselves and our neighbours during the years '94 and '95, while the sense of danger hovered over us, ever more perceptibly, like a threatening shadow... There had never been the least warning sign in spite of other closely concerned visits, especially in the direction of the dispensary. The danger swooped down on us suddenly, unexpectedly, with nothing which could have enabled us to foresee it... *In manus tuas Domine...*

And so I arrive at 21 January of the year 1994. Four days have passed since I received the large envelope from Algeria. I reply to Christian's letter without delay in order to come close to the community of Atlas, wounded in its life but for a greater and better life.

Dear Dom Christian,

Since the chronicle of the events experienced at Atlas in December and at the beginning of January, and since our telephone conversation, I must tell you that you are very much present in our thoughts and in our prayer, you and your brothers of Atlas.

I have shared what has happened to you with the members of the community of the Generalate ; you know practically all of them and so can be assured of their fraternal support and their prayer.

It is not difficult to believe, as you wrote in the chronicle, that in community you have lived through an experience of profound communion, moment by moment, receiving everything as a true gift from God. It is still impossible to foresee how events will evolve now, but in your manner of living the grace of the "present moment", you can be certain that the Lord, fulfilling his word, is with you. "I shall be with you until the end of the world ; for where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of

them". And, as I was saying in the homily at the beginning of the General Chapter, he is with you, ready to make use of unexpected means to surmount all the obstacles and to work with the grace of salvation in this history which is yours... and ours. [...]

Dear Christian, if I can do anything to help you, yourself and your brothers, don't hesitate to let me know and I will do whatever I can to be of service to you.

I embrace you very fraternally...

A VISIT IN LENT FORESHADOWS EASTER *Everything is Easter in the life of God's sons and daughters*

The night before Christmas, 1993, was a "Holy Night", a completely unexpected night for our seven Brothers. Much less unexpected, however, was what happened on the Lenten night of Tuesday to Wednesday March 27 of the present year. Toward the end of November last year, Christian wrote in the name of all the Brothers:

The presence of death. Traditionally, this is a constant companion of the monk. This companionship has taken on a more concrete clarity with the direct threats, the assassinations very close at hand, certain visits... It offers itself to us as a useful and not too convenient test of truth (Christian, How, in the present situation, can we return to the charism of our Order ?, 21-XI-95).

On February 27, one month before the abduction, I wrote to Christian and the community for the last time. They never received that letter. I retrieved it during my stay in Algiers, and was able to read it with Father Amedée. I told them:

We shall meet this coming October at the General Chapter, Deo volente. Meanwhile, I wish you all a fervent preparation for Easter, an Easter already full of the strength and joy of the Resurrection.

At about 10.00 in the morning of that Lenten day, March 26, I arrive with Father André at the monastery of Tilburg, in Holland. The following morning, the 27th, Dom Armand phones me from Rome to inform me what had happened the previous night at Tibhirine. At about 2.45 that afternoon, Father André is able to speak on the telephone with Archbishop Tessier of Algiers. A quarter of an hour later, we speak with Father Jean-Pierre of Atlas. These first reports help us appreciate immediately the significance of what has happened. At once I share the reports with Dom Armand and ask him to prepare an *Urgent Report to the Presidents of the Regional Conferences*, to be communicated to all the monasteries of the Order.

Thus begins a long wait during Lent and Eastertide, which ended shortly before the feast of Pentecost, that is, from March 27 to May 23, 1996. On April 27, exactly one month after the abduction, Communiqué 43 from the GIA is made known. They are asking for an exchange of prisoners. The final lines leave little room for hope: "*You may choose: if you free your prisoners, we will free ours; if you do not, we will cut their throats.*"

The Holy Father spoke out during the Palm Sunday Angelus on March 31. "*Let them go back to their monastery safe and sound, and let them take up their place again among their Algerian friends.*" Two weeks later, during the same prayer to Our Lady while he was visiting Tunis, he repeated his plea for setting the monks free. On May 1st, feast of St. Joseph, each and every one of us dedicated a day to prayer and penance for the freeing of our Brothers and for peace in Algeria.

Thus we come to 23 May. A new communiqué from the GIA ends by saying, "*...we have cut the throats of the seven monks... And this was done this morning, 21 May*". You know the rest.

But what happened that Lenten night between the 26th and 27th of March? During my visit to Algiers I had the opportunity to speak about this at length with Fathers Jean-Pierre, Amédée and T.B. I asked them to be so good as to write down for me all that they experienced in the monastery that night. The 3 accounts are several pages long. But as the stories are very consistent with one another it is easy to reduce them to a single account. Here is what happened that night of 26 - 27 March, in the words of those who lived through the events. They are not the only witnesses, but they are, today, the ones who can speak.

Tuesday 26 March, 1996. 5th week of Lent.

[Fr. Jean-Pierre] At the Eucharist, the last Eucharist celebrated together in community, the Gospel was John 8, 21-30 : Jesus announced his departure. "I am going away and you will seek me". To the intransigent and obstinate Jews, he predicted his death and how it would come about... He also announced, in his death, his exaltation. At the same time he showed his confidence and his inner Peace : "He who sent me is always with me, he has not left me alone because I do always the things that please him". The brothers couldn't have known, on hearing and meditating on these words at that midday hour, that they were about to be taken up, the following night, in the same mystery...

The night of 26 - 27 March, 1996

[Fr. Jean-Pierre:] As I was the night porter, I slept in the porter's room which was immediately next to the porch entrance. This door was bolted shut from 5:30 each evening to 7:30 the next morning. 5:30 in the evening marked the end of the work-day and it was the time we stopped seeing people at the dispensary. That night around 1:15 a.m., I was awakened by the sound of voices near the window of the porter's room which overlooks the yard...it was a conversation in Arabic between 2 or 3 persons. Given the hour, I realized immediately that it was a visit from the men of the mountain, who had broken into the cloister. The doorbell had not rung. I got closer to the window to see what was going on, in such a way as to not be seen myself. I couldn't see the group as they were in a recess in the doorway, on the right. But a shadowy figure was moving towards them, coming from the small metal door which opens out onto the street. That door was open. The man was armed. He had a tommy-gun and was walking towards the others in front of the door. I went to the other side by the glass door which gave on to the porch entrance to the monastery. I saw a man wearing a turban, with a tommy-gun slung across his shoulder, entering the door that gives on to the cloister and to Br. Luc's room. As the conversation and the proceedings didn't seem aggressive, I didn't realize the gravity of the situation. I thought it was a request for the doctor's care as this had happened before, in a somewhat similar fashion. This all the more so, as nothing I had seen led me to believe that there were around twenty terrorists, according to the guardian. The others must have been elsewhere at that point. I told myself that since I had n't woken up, Christian had forestalled me and must have let them in, as the room where he slept was not far from the entrance to the monastery. In reality, according to the guardian, they had gained access into the monastery not by the main door, but by a door behind the buildings on the basement level, that opens onto the garden. They had therefore arrived at Christian's room and Br. Luc's by passing through the interior of the buildings. At the time I woke up, both were already in front of the entrance, in this group in conversation : Christian in the middle of the courtyard; Br. Luc with the medical bag he takes on visits in his hands. The latter was ready to accompany those men to go and attend to those who were allegedly seriously wounded. The guardian was also there. It was he who gave me these last details... I began to pray while waiting for it to end. At a given moment, I heard : "Who is the chief ?" and the reply coming from a third person : "He is the chief, you must do what he tells you". At that moment, according to the guardian, the order was given to open all the doors. I heard comings and goings in the entrance hall, but of single individuals. Then, nothing more. The small door opening onto the street was closed with its characteristic sound. I went out to go to the bathroom before going back to bed. The cloister lights had been turned off. (N.B. it was Fr. Amédée who had turned them off). Everything seemed to me to be in order. I thought that Christian had sent away the men of the mountain and had returned to bed. One thing seemed strange, however : some of the type of clothing that Fr. Luke collected for the poor was strewn on the ground under the porch, and in the adjoining room. I said to myself: "Did they ask for some clothing, which they didn't like and threw there on their way out?" A few

minutes later, there was a knock at my door, the glass door which overlooked the porch. It was Fr. Amédée accompanied by T.B. "Do you know what has happened ?," he asked . "We are the only ones here ; all the others have been taken away."

[Fr. Amédée] It was 1:15, Wednesday, 27 March 1996, when I was awakened by the unusual sound of cartons of medicines being noisily turned upside down. I said to myself: "When Brother Luc is looking for medicine, even at night, he doesn't make this much noise".

Then I heard soft speaking by my room, but I didn't hear Brother Luc's voice ; nor his asthmatic cough. I suddenly realized that they were there, that they had come in the middle of the night. Something about which I had had no illusions was now taking place ! We had, in effect, received no threat since the famous night of Christmas 1993... when the terrible leader

had left, excusing himself, challenged by the birth of Jesus bringing peace, as Father Christian had explained to him. But he would return, said he, we had no choice. He had not returned, either to require that the young people of the neighborhood join them, nor to ambush and kill persons on the road to Tibhirine. Fr. Jean-Pierre, Fr. R. and Br. Luc often travelled that road to do their errands. And so we had been able to continue our monastic life in a normal way these three years, even to the point of authorizing the Ribât es- Salâm to meet at our monastery on the very eve of the tragedy.

And so this commando of about twenty terrorists, sent from afar, under orders, was there, two paces away from my room. They had tried to open it. Every night I took the trouble to lock the door. Concerned, no doubt, with the boxes of medicines in the main room, they did not pursue trying to open my door for the moment. I looked at my watch with a small covered light. It was 1:15. I dressed silently. I tried to see through the keyhole. The room was completely lit up. They continued to overturn boxes of medicines, but they were too close to Br. Luc's room for me to see them. They continued to speak softly amongst themselves.

I waited calmly. Suddenly there was no more noise but all the lights had been left on. I gently opened my door without making any noise. I could see that no one was around, but everything in the room was in great disorder. I went immediately to Br. Luc's room some metres from mine. There was no longer anyone there and the room in great disorder ; medicines, books on the floor, the little new radio set disappeared. Sensing the tragedy that had taken place, I went immediately to Fr. Christian's office where he had been sleeping for some time to be near us just opposite the door which from Br. Luc's room opens onto the little scriptorium corridor. It was open, the office all lit up, everything upside down, papers everywhere ; his electric typewriter gone, also the camera with the film already begun, the telephone taken from the table, all wires cut and left on a chair ; no Br. Luc, no Fr. Christian, no voices, not even Br. Luc's cough. I was aghast. Some of Fr. Christian's clothes and shoes had been stolen and thrown down in the corner of the corridor.

I soon began to think of our guests of the Ribât, on the same floor, near the rooms of our brothers. I extinguished all the lights and went up the stairs near the library. The rooms of the brothers were open and the lights were on, but none of my brothers were there and their beds were left untidy. The floor was covered with papers. Drawers had been over-turned. Suitcases had been opened, and no one there ! It was a shock and I began to fear the worst for our guests who slept just behind the enclosure door. I opened it gently and there everything was calm. The night light was on, the bedrooms doors shut. I knock at the first door, the cell where Fr. T.B. slept.

[T.B., a guest] D.P., a priest and member of our Ribât, woke me up, saying: "T.B. something abnormal is happening with the Fathers." I leap out of bed and go out into the hallway. Another priest - J.J. - and I were sleeping in the guest rooms of the monastic buildings, separated by a doorway from the rooms of the monks.

In effect, I hear tables and chairs being moved around, but no voices except for some protests that seem to come from Célestin. So I assume he is sick and that they want to move him down near Brother Luc, then I think they can't take him to the hospital at night.

D.P. half opens the door to the monks' enclosure and sees M. with his back to the wall, perfectly still between the two doors, Célestin, also perfectly still, and a suitcase in the hallway. M. eventually notices that the door is ajar and signals with his head not to enter or move. When D.P. tells us this, we realize that the "people from the mountain" are in the monastery and I suppose that the monks have been forced to assemble together. D.P. half opens the door again, there is now only one suitcase in the hallway. Then silence. D.P. again half opens the door ; the suitcase is no longer there.

There is no question of making ourselves conspicuous, or of leaving by the outside staircase, since there are probably armed men all around the building. Each one goes back to his room in silence. If we are involved in what is going on, Christian will come to tell us. I thought that the moment of death had arrived. I went back to bed. I was cold but I was very calm, asking the Lord to hold me in his peace, and at the same time, asking him to postpone the day of my passing, because so many administrative affairs were in progress that I feared the enormous task the diocese would have if I should disappear without first putting some of my affairs in order. I was also listening for exterior noises, or the engine of a car.

At that moment, the door opens, a lamp lights up my room and by the light of the night light in the hall, I recognize Brother Amédée. He says : "T.B., are you there? The monastery is empty. There isn't a single Father left !" I dress in great haste and I see with Amédée that the rooms of the brethren are all in disorder ; in Paul's, who returned from France the same day and brought back gifts and sweets for Easter, all the boxes of sweets and chocolates have been opened and emptied except one, perhaps they thought those chocolates contained alcohol. I later returned to get this box and put it in the fridge for when the brothers came back. Sweet papers were strewn on the floor. Surprisingly, the computer and printer had been left.

We went downstairs to the kitchen. Everything was in place except that the door of the refrigerator had been left open. Nothing had been touched in the refectory.

In the cloister, the room that served as an office and a telephone room had not been opened. Everything was in place. But the telephone lines had been cut.

We went towards the porter's room. The main doorway was open. We knocked at Jean-Pierre's door. "It's Amédée, are you there?" Jean-Pierre opened the door, fully dressed. He had been praying. The joy of finding him. We told him of the disappearance of the monks. He told us he saw armed men on the porch and that he heard them leave, but had not seen the brothers with them.

[Fr. Jean-Pierre] We went to examine the state of the rooms, Christian's room as well as Br. Luc's...everything was in indescribable disorder : papers on the floor, drawers and cupboards open, tables piled up with various objects, Christian's typewriter gone , also his camera. Our first thought was to bring in the security service, but we found Christian's telephone cables cut. In the secretary's office, all was in order. They mustn't have gone there , but that telephone was not working either. Later that day we found out that the exterior cables had been cut. The one that connected the monastery with the guardian's house was on the ground. Even the main cable which contained the lines of that area had been cut about 1.5 kilometres away on the road to Medea. Therefore it was a question of something very different from wounded persons who needed to be treated. In the rooms on that floor, of Christophe, Paul, Bruno, Michel, and Célestin, the same disorder. Paul had just returned the evening before from a visit to his elderly mother in Savoy. His suitcase had been searched and certain objects had disappeared. In the hallway of the reading room, at the foot of the stairs , Amédée sees a large cheese from Tamié, placed in front of the icon of the Mother of the Lord. It hadn't been taken on account of the cross on the wrapping. We didn't find anyone's identity papers, except those of Christian in a little bag which we discovered later in one of the files, and Br. Luc's, also found later among his things. According to the guardian, the kidnappers would have ordered the brothers to take all their papers... Apart from the rooms on that floor, about which I have

spoken, Br. Luc's and the room where his medicines were stored, and Fr. Christian's room, none of the other parts of the monastery seem to have been visited. The departure of the brothers seems to have been very hurried. Which way did they go out? I don't know. I saw nothing, nor did I hear a group of people passing, nor any voice that I could have recognised as Br. Luc's strong voice, or his way of coughing. Nothing. If I had realized that they were taking away the brothers, how would I have reacted?

[T.B., a guest] We needed to inform others at once, to go to M's to telephone. There was a padlock on the door to the courtyard of his house. We called. Finally his children, then his wife, came to tell us: "They came to look for M." Their telephone line, too, had been cut.

[P. Jean Pierre] We found his wife panic-stricken. It was then that we learned that the kidnappers had begun by contacting the guardian at his home. They had forced him to open the entrance by knocking on the door and breaking windows, and then to accompany them to the monastery, saying that they needed to call Br. Luc and get him to accompany them to treat two seriously wounded persons. We thought then that the guardian must have been taken away with our brothers as we didn't see him after that. I stayed for a short time with his wife and children to comfort them and encourage them to cope while waiting for more news.

[T.B., a guest] We needed to inform other neighbors and to try to telephone. Jean-Pierre and I each took a flashlight and went down to A.'s, lighting only the path by our feet, so we could find the way to his house situated down from the road, which was not easy. At the same time I felt anxious, and wanted to return to the monastery, while feeling the need to tell A. what had happened. Finally I found the door. No one answered. I went up to the terrace, tapping with my foot. No one budged. It was only then that the dogs awoke and began to bark. As no one came out - and that was perfectly understandable - we went back to the monastery.

It was nearly 3 a.m. With Amédée, J.J., and D.P., who joined us later as did J.J., we decided to wait until daybreak. To have left by car for Medea in the night risked adding another victim and having the car stolen as well. To have gone on foot to alert the police was to risk their not answering, and never would a police patrol go out before daybreak.

We decided to go back to bed, but Amédée told us: "I haven't finished my rosary," a rosary he was reciting while Jean-Pierre and I were out in the night. We recited the rest of the rosary with Amédée, and we arranged to rise at 5 a.m. I had a deep peace in my heart, with the sense that there was nothing else to do at that point. At 5:15 we met in the cloister. D.P., Jean-Pierre, and Amédée. I had the urge to ring the bell for Matins to show everyone that life continued, but I changed my mind, thinking that it could also inform the kidnappers that they hadn't taken all the monks. We began the Office. I felt honoured to hold the place in choir of the abducted brothers, as best I could. At the end of the 2nd psalm, D.P. and I could no longer follow the monastic tones and we decided to recite the psalms. After the Office, we ate a good breakfast.

It was daybreak. Jean-Pierre and I went down to A.'s. I went back up on the terrace to call and kicked with my feet again. The children finally came out of the house to tell us what had happened. At that point, M. called out to me from the other side of the grille. He was in the garden. He had escaped and had hidden himself. He immediately asked news of his family and the brothers. We went to fetch him. He was exhausted. He told us what he had experienced and how he had escaped.

We urgently needed to inform the army and the police. I decided to go with Jean-Pierre and to leave M. to rest a little since I feared the interrogation that he would have to undergo from the police. Jean-Pierre proposed that we first go to see the head of the military station. He knew him.

Jean-Pierre and I took my car and drove towards Draa ess Mar to inform the military. There was a thick fog.

We decided not to wait, but to go to Medea to inform the police. We arrived at 7:15 a.m. The Police Commander was just leaving with three cars for a planned operation. He received us immediately but

showed neither surprise nor emotion at what we told him. Everything was exchanged in arabic. He immediately phoned the Chief of Police, and he authorized me to inform F. Henri Teissier and gave me the telephone. Henri Teissier asked me if he might inform the French Ambassador. I passed on the request to the Commander who after a moment's hesitation, gave his permission. The Police would themselves inform the Algerian Press Service who would announce the news that morning. I was most surprised at this exceptional rapidity.

But the Commander had to leave on business. He handed us over to an assistant. They brought us coffee. We wait. There are no more cars available to provide a convoy to Tibhirine . An officer comes to take our statement at about 9.00. Everything is in arabic. I serve as translator, I make them read over the statements before we sign them. The Police hold a dossier with all the information on the French monks. Amédée, being an Algerian, is not included. We had to find Bruno in a previous dossier. At 11 a.m. they finally allowed us all to leave. All the police we had met had been friendly and attentive. Only one of them spoke French. Many of them seemed quite familiar with the texts of Islam and hadn't much knowledge of other religions. They apologized to us.

On the return trip we noticed that a team from P & T was repairing the telephone cable that had been severed on top of the hill at the same level as the entrance to the former amusement park.

When we arrived at the monastery, we saw that all the members of the Ribât had left for Algiers except for D.P., as there was no room for him in the cars. I decided to stay with Amédée and Jean-Pierre as long as needed. D.P. felt that he should join the group in Algiers and Jean-Pierre remembered Fr.L.C.'s car, as he wasn't at present in Algiers and had left his car at the monastery. So D.P. left for Algiers in the R4 which would be safer at the Diocesan House.

A first group of police came at about 10 a.m. to verify what had happened. But all that day we saw no movement of troops in that region. The neighbours were not interrogated.

At noon it was time to celebrate Mass and sing Sext. It was an intense celebration. Amédée and Jean-Pierre asked me to preside. A deep peace filled me, as well as joy at sharing this day with the two brother monks. I felt I was in my place at that point. There was an astonishing presence of our missing brothers in that empty chapel.

[P. Jean-Pierre] Towards noon, the three of us celebrated the Eucharist in the monastery chapel. T.B. presided. He commented on the texts of Wednesday, the 5th week of Lent in connection with what had taken place. The passage from Daniel related the incident of the three youths in the furnace and really spoke to us. They preferred to be thrown into the furnace rather than obey the king's orders and adore false Gods. Bound, they found themselves free, unharmed in the midst of the flames, praising God with a single heart. Their courage and fidelity towards God and the powerful intervention of the Lord brought about a radical change in the heart of the king. He also began to praise God, the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego.

[T.B., a guest] Amédée and Jean-Pierre confided to me that they didn't know how to cook, and I was happy to prepare the meal. The telephone, once reconnected, didn't stop ringing. The first call came from a cousin of Br. Luc who asked for news, as his brother, who was in the Congo, had informed him of the abduction of the monks! Then there was the annoying insistence of the journalists. I refused to talk.

We eventually had our lunch. While doing the dishes, we received a call from Mme. de Chergé and Claire who were concerned about the safety of the monks remaining on the property, asking how they were, encouraging them. We realized that the two large pots in the kitchen were full, one with soup and the other with beans. Luc had prepared the meal for the whole household: 9 monks and 12 members of the Ribât, in the middle of the night, as he often did... just before he was abducted.

We decided to rest until None. When we finished the Office a police squadron arrived to make an inquiry and take photos. We had not touched anything until their arrival. The police were surprised by the monks'

simplicity of life. With them was detachment of armed men. I remembered Christian's attitude on the night of the visit of 24 December 1993, and I asked the armed men to leave the cloister and wait outside ;" this is a house of peace and prayer, no armed men enter here". They went out without the least opposition. Then the one in charge of security asked us not to spend the night in the place. We propose sleeping at G.N's, who has left his keys in the monastery. He telephones us from Paris soon after, to give us details. The police wish to accompany us before nightfall. We agree with them for 7 p.m. At this moment a neighbour arrives with a cowl which he has found on the road 600 metres from the monastery. It is Michel's. I imagine Michel taking his cowl so that he can die in his habit. Amédée, Jean-Pierre and I begin to put the brothers' rooms in order. We looked for their identity papers, without success, and realized that each of them had taken the small suitcase that he had kept in readiness. M. told us that the armed men had ordered the brothers to take their papers.

I block all the entrances to the monastery with thick wooden planks. We sing Vespers. We eat the soup and beans prepared by Luc with a salad from the garden. We take what we need for the night along with a suitcase full of precious objects and the money.

Between two police cars, we left for Medea. As we approached the level of the Grand Hotel Msala, the first car turned to enter the hotel grounds. I continued towards G.N.'s house but the car behind signalled me to stop: we were to go to the hotel. The police lieutenant explained that the Wali had reserved rooms for us there. And so the three of us entered this large hotel, carrying our bed linen in our arms, and were welcomed in the grandest style. They invited us to dine in the restaurant. We excused ourselves, as we had already dined. They invited us to have coffee. It was a delightful and touching sight to see our two brothers in their jackets and woollen bonnets, sitting at table in the restaurant, surrounded by the Proprietor of the Hotel, the Police Commander, the Chief of the Wali's cabinet, the Chief of Security of the Wilaya, who had come to welcome them. All the people who saw us were astounded.

We went up to our rooms ; two rooms each with two beds, with a communicating door, and bathrooms. A detachment of communal guards was placed in front of the doors. We arranged to meet the police the following morning at 8 o'clock. We sang Compline and went to bed. I asked the brothers to excuse me from rising for the night office. In the morning, after singing Lauds, we go down to breakfast. The police are there, we return to the monastery.

I make arrangements for the day with the police lieutenant, we shall leave for Algiers about 4 p.m. In the morning, Amédée has errands to carry out in Medea. I act as his chauffeur and I ask the police lieutenant not to surround us with police vehicles in order not to scare the people of Medea. He agrees to this. Just one car follows us discreetly.

We go with Amédée to get money from the bank, to pay the fuel man who has filled the monastery pumps, and then we return. Everywhere we are welcomed warmly, with much sadness.

At the monastery we decided on what we would need to take: the archives, precious objects, electronic devices, and perishable food. Amédée paid the workmen. From the Diocesan House of Algiers, the archbishop suggested some helpers. P.L. and P.R., the hermit, who was absent at the time of the tragedy, would come to help us move. Military protection was posted at the doors of the monastery.

I prepared lunch. At 12:30 we celebrated Mass and Sext. We sat down to eat when P.L. and P.R. arrived. I closed all the doors so that the military would not wander around in the house. Halfway through the meal, a phone call came from M., the guardian: "Everything is shut. We can't get in. The Archbishop, the French Ambassador and the Wali are here !" The brothers decide to receive them in the Chapter room.

I go to open the main door to receive them. Behind the authorities, a crowd of armed men press forward. I stop them in the cloister and explain to them the character of this house. They accept it courteously and retire to the outside gate.

The brothers recount the facts anew to the ambassador and the Wali. We thank the Wali for the protection and for the reception at the hotel, we talk of security measures for the house, and we promise to leave at 4 p.m. The brothers are authorized to come back to the monastery during the day. An escort accompanies us as far as Algiers. When the authorities retire, the archbishop invites the ambassador to visit the chapel with the brothers ; I ask the Wali if he too would like to come into the chapel ; when he answers in the affirmative, I invite him to come in with me. The police commander wanted to follow us in, but at a sign from my hand he understood very courteously that this would not be appropriate. The same applied to the ambassador's bodyguard.

The cortège left us. We had an hour to finish closing up the house and pack the cars. The brothers left their R4 for the use of M. so that he could sleep in Medea. P.R. wanted to remain at the monastery but I insisted firmly that he should go with us , since I had promised that no-one would spend the night in the monastery.

At that point, a police officer realized that Amédée had not been interrogated, as, being an Algerian, he was not on the list of foreigners. I insisted that he give a statement, and had the text re-read in Arabic before allowing him to sign it. The police officer was astonished that we were leaving everything in place. I told him it was normal, as the Fathers would return.

We checked to make sure that everything was extinguished and well closed at the guest house and all over the monastery. We loaded the cars. We said good-bye to all the neighbours. "Don't leave us; you must return."

A police car preceded us and two armed cars followed our two cars. Arriving in Algiers, I led the convoy to direct it to the Diocesan House and we arrived around 5:30 p.m.

I am happy to have lived through those two intense days with Amédée and Jean-Pierre, so serene, peaceful, humble, and to have experienced the strength given from on high to accomplish what needed to be done at the moment without unnecessary fuss, and to have enjoyed the unfolding of a normal monastic day, astonished at having come so close to death and feeling thereby a new freedom. "May I spend the time that is left to me in giving thanks."

The following week

[Fr. Jean-Pierre] We stayed at the diocesan house until the following Saturday, the day when Dom Armand Veilleux arrived on behalf of our Rev. Fr. General. He came to embrace us with all his solicitude and fraternal presence for about ten days, until Thursday, April 11th. All three of us then went together to Glycines where F. Georger reserved us each a room in those calm and silent quarters. Father Amédée and I waited there, day after day, for news of our dear missing brothers. Towards the end of April, we decided to go to Fes at the beginning of May. At first, both of us were to go, but then myself alone, as we learned at Tibhirine that P.R. and our neighbours were counting very much on our maintaining a concrete link with them. I left Algeria for Fes on May 3rd...

The sanctuary lamp in our chapel at Tibhirine was blown out on that sad night of the 26 - 27 March. The chapel that had known the chants and prayers at the regular hours of the Divine Office since 1937, became suddenly silent and empty. "How long, O Lord ?" "It is but an 'au revoir'", our hearts sing ; "Our brothers have gone away." It was the time just before Holy Week. A great, long trial was awaiting us. They achieved their trial while paschal time was coming to an end, during the week before Pentecost : "Come, O Spirit of the Lord, come, alleluia!" Calling down the Holy Spirit on the Church, on the world...they were taken in the Work of God down to the innermost depth of their being, body and soul... and through it... they were heard in their strong desire to be only one with him and to follow him wherever he went... Wonderful is the Lord, I sing to God with my whole heart. What will be the fate of those who remain ? We shall see !!! I am surprised at the great solidarity aroused on the occasion of this tragedy, a solidarity in emotion, pain and prayer, but also in hope.

A WISDOM THAT COMES FROM REMEMBERING
Teachers and Mystics in the School of Charity

Christian wisdom consists in a divine plan of salvation. This plan has its source and its summit in the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ. That is why Jesus is the "Wisdom of God" (1 Cor, 1:24). To practise wisdom is to remember and keep in one's heart the saving interventions of God in history, putting into practice the norms of conduct which flow from them. We invoke Mary, the Mother of Jesus Christ, as the Seat of Wisdom for two reasons: for having conceived Incarnate Wisdom in her womb, and for having conceived in her heart the wisdom that comes from meditating, pondering and interpreting the words and saving deeds of Christ the Lord.

The Lord has done great things in the life of our Brothers. His work in them is also a word. In these pages we have let them express their thoughts and feelings. They themselves have told us their story and have revealed its meaning to us. It is true: God still reveals his secrets to his friends, the prophets.

Since their passover, our seven Brothers have begun to work wonders in our Order... and in the Church. It is the hour to begin anew to listen to what the Spirit, working in them, is saying to the Church and to the world: he speaks and teaches in this school of schools of charity which is the Order.

There is a first message directed to all men and women of good will. The hidden and silent pasch of these Brothers is transformed into a Gospel appeal which resounds unambiguously.

- Ask forgiveness from God for these aggressors. Only forgiveness can break the chain of hatred and violence. To forgive is an act of profound respect which enables us to discover in the offender, beyond all dissimilarity, the image of God. To forgive is to acknowledge and proclaim that, despite all malice and our ignorance, God recognizes us as well-beloved sons and daughters. To forgive is to bear witness, in spite of everything, to our divine sonship and universal brotherhood. The word of pardon is the word which is most in harmony with the heart of the martyr in that it is a faithful witness to love.

I should like, when the time comes, to have a space of lucidity which would enable me to beg forgiveness of God and of my brother human beings, and at the same time to forgive with all my heart the one who would strike me down... (Christian, Spiritual Testament).

- The martyr who gives up his life forgiving, doesn't accuse anyone. An extremist group is not representative of a people: nothing would be more absurd than to blame the Algerian people or the Islamic world for what has happened. Nor should we accuse the ones who were physically responsible for the tragedy. We should trust that the word of forgiveness is able to dispel all ignorance and malice, allowing the light to grow in oneself and to find spaces of freedom for the transformation of one's own existence. Every human being deserves to be loved.

I don't see how I could rejoice if the people I love were indiscriminately accused of my murder. It would be too high a price to pay for what will be called, perhaps, the "grace of martyrdom", to owe this to an Algerian, whoever he may be, especially if he says he is acting in fidelity to what he believes to be Islam (...) 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 ! (Christian, Spiritual Testament).

- The martyrs of love are true artisans of peace. It is not simply a matter of being patient and putting up with or tolerating evil. Nor is it enough to be placid in not doing or wishing harm to anyone. Much more is required: to build up and construct peace by the gift of one's own life. No-one took it from them, they gave it up.

I don't think violence can eradicate violence. We can only exist as man by accepting to make ourselves the image of Love, as is manifested in Christ who, himself just, wished to submit to the lot of the unjust. (Luc, Letter, 24-III-96)

- Human life has a meaning - it is a path to a goal - and this meaning is found only when life is given and offered purely and gratuitously. If life is a gift that has been received, then whoever converts his life into a gift offered lives and causes others to live. To live is to love. And death can be the last act of love capable of giving a sense of eternity to life.

There is no true love of God without an unreserved acceptance of death. (Luc, Letter, 19-III-95).

The Spirit is also speaking today to the Church universal and to all the local Churches. And this is what she is telling them.

- The Islam-Christian inter-religious dialogue has now new motives for continuing : seven lives given are a good foundation for a mutual understanding. They knew that actions speak more eloquently than words.

Not having the linguistic and religious knowledge necessary to enter into dialogue with Islam, I feel called more simply to listen. And it is God who is heard in his Word who is sent, who tells me to listen, to welcome all this strange, different reality. To the point of feeling myself responsible : may the Spirit lead it towards the full truth. And if we can make this journey together, so much the better ! and making this journey we can speak and be silent. (Christophe, Journal, 30-I-96).

We have to be witnesses of the Emmanuel, that is to say, of "God with us". There is a presence of "God among men" which we ourselves must assume. It is in this perspective that we understand our vocation to be fraternal presence of men and women who share the life of the muslims, the Algerians, in prayer, silence and friendship. Church-Islam relations are still stammering, because we haven't yet lived from their side. (Christian, Reflections for Lent, 8-III-96).

- The seven martyrs of Atlas are a ripe fruit of the local Church of the Algerian people : they decided to remain so that they could continue to live in the midst of this Church and this people. They desired to create a Church in Algeria for the Algerian people.

If something happens to us, I hope it doesn't, we want to experience it here, in solidarity with all the Algerian men and women who have already paid with their life, simply in solidarity with all those unknown, innocent people... It seems to me that He who is helping us to hold fast today is the One who has called us. I remain in deep wonder at this. (Michel, Letter, IV-94).

I am certain that God loves the Algerians, and that he has no doubt chosen to prove it to them by giving them our lives. So then, do we truly love them ? Do we love them enough ? A moment of truth for each one, and a heavy responsibility in these times when our friends feel so little loved. Slowly, each one is learning to integrate death into this gift, and with it all the other conditions of this ministry of living together which is the demand of total gratuity. On certain days, all this appears hardly reasonable. As little reasonable as becoming a monk... (Christian, Circular letter to the community, 25-IV-95).

- God uses what is weak to build great things : only the obscure witnesses to a hope can become luminous martyrs of love. They made the choice to be the small seeds buried in the ground so that the giant tree of the Kingdom might grow.

What will remain in a few months of the Church in Algeria, of its visibility, of its structures, of the persons of whom it is made up ? Little, very little, probably. However, I believe that the Good News is sown, the grain is germinating... The Spirit is at work, he works deep down in the hearts of men. Let us be willing that he be able to work in us by prayer and loving presence to all our brothers. (Paul, Letter, 11-I-95).

Our Church has been severely shaken, especially in our diocese of Algiers. Reduced, ravaged, she has in this the sharp experience of the renunciation and the reward described in the Gospel as belonging to the vocation of each of us to follow Jesus. Vulnerable, fragile in the extreme, she finds herself also freer and more credible in her vow "to love to the end"... (Christian, How, in our present situation, can we return to the charism of our Order ?, 21-XI-95).

Before my death, tell me that my faith - Love - will hold strong. Suddenly I am afraid to believe (Christophe, Journal, 1-2-94).

Here I am before you, O my God...Here I am, rich in misery and poverty, and an indescribable weakness. Here I am before You who are nothing but Love and Mercy. Before you, but solely by your grace, I am here whole and entire, with all my soul, all my heart, all my will (Bruno, 21-3-90).

There is also a word for us, monks and nuns of the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance. For us, who, after nine centuries of existence, are preparing to cross the threshold of a new millennium with hearts renewed and enlarged.

- They followed Jesus, to the end, according to the absolute radicalism of the Gospel. They took on the attitudes and choices of Jesus. They embraced his destiny. They were disfigured with Him in order to be configured to Him. They took on themselves the cross of abnegation in order to hasten the coming of the Kingdom. They preferred nothing to the love of Christ, the Servant of the servants of God.

*I ask of you this day the grace to become a servant
and to give my life
here
as a ransom for peace
as a ransom for life
Jesus draw me
into your joy
of crucified love.
(Christophe, Journal, 25-7-95).*

- They were plunged into the mystery until they were completely transformed. A mysterious influence enabled them to experience the mystery to the point of becoming fire and light. Our seven mystics stretch out their hands to introduce us too into the transforming glory of God. They invite us to fix our gaze in the obscurity of the darkness until we contemplate the face of the Other. They tell us there is no transcendence without transience and immanence. Word and Eucharist are the door leading in to the heart of God, source of all transformation.

*You speak to me - when I say and sing : As for me, thanks to your love,
I have access to your house.
There within myself - so far, so near :
In you, I have access to my I, given up to the love with which you are loved,
if someone loves me - and how can I say that I love if not thanks to your very Breath.
We are going to his house
I and my Father.
(Christophe, Journal, 4-3-94).*

- They lived together, died together and entered together into eternal life. The community is the sacred place where God reveals himself. Love welded them together in a bond of everlasting solidarity. Common life is worth very little if there is no communion of life. *Koinonfa* makes the Risen one visible who makes all things new. They did not pursue what they judged better for themselves, but instead, what was better for the others. That is why the Lord brought them, all together and at the same time, to everlasting life.

Listen, Church : I am.

*Listen, I am in you, as the Father is in me, He in me and I in Him,
we are ONE*

Listen : I am in you the Resurrection : the Life.

Thanks to you (in you, with you), I leap over the wall. There is my sin standing before me - this lack of love-given to my brothers - thanks to you, I do not remain - too long - frightened, despairing... I have overcome death.

And so, when my fraternal existence will be lived out on this side

Since you desire to see us come all together to this eternal Life,

Today you say to me : Arise, go to yourself, to your paschal I.

(Christophe, Journal, 30-X-94).

For the community of Atlas, Christmas 1993 was an experience that marked them for the rest of their lives. Two years later they recognized that *"through that experience we felt invited to be born anew. The life of man goes from birth to birth (...). In our life there is always a child to be born : the son of God whom each of us is."* (Christian, *Reflections for Lent*, 8-III-96).

We too, Cistercian monks and nuns, through what happened to our Brothers, are invited to be born anew. The path has been marked out, we have only to walk along it.

With Jesus, all together, towards the Father.

From the Order, through the Church, to the whole human race.

Opening up to inculturation, to discernment, to ecumenism and to dialogue.

It is not a matter of dying, but of living radically. And if the price of fidelity is death, let us pay this price, knowing that this is how Life is purchased.

O Jesus, I accept with all my heart that your death is renewed, is accomplished in me ; I know that it is with you that we make this vertiginous descent into the depths proclaiming to the devil that he has been conquered. (Célestin, Easter antiphon).

The true pilgrim has his two feet firmly planted in the present and raises them promptly in his journey toward the future, knowing that the Lord is guiding his steps. The road opens before him as he walks, as long as there is music and song in his heart. In a letter which appeared only after his death, Father Célestin himself said it in all simplicity:

In carrying out my daily duties (and this helps me each day), this morning I sing two little sentences : "O God, you are our Hope on the face of all the living", and " Wonder of your grace ! You entrust to men the secrets of the Father" (Letter, 22-I-96).

I embrace you fraternally in Mary of Saint Joseph,

Bernardo Olivera
Abbot General