
ABBAS GENERALIS

Prot. N° 97/AG/01

OUR BROTHERS OF ATLAS - IV
Keeping their Memory Alive

Very dear brothers and sisters

Pope John Paul II sent a message to our General Chapters from the Gemelli Hospital last October 10, 1996. He ended it by telling us: *Brothers and sisters, you are the custodians of the remembrance of this martyrdom, the persons on watch in prayer, in shared discernment and in the concrete directives which you decide upon, so that the memory of this event remain fruitful in the future for Trappists and for the whole Church.*

It is true. We are the heirs of the martyrdom suffered by our brothers. We have no doubt that they are the light of the world. A lamp is not lit and then put under a basket. It is set on a lampstand. What, then, can we do to have the memory of these events bear fruit for the Order and for the entire Church? The first thing that comes to mind as a reply is to share with each of you, my brothers and sisters, on this first anniversary of the passage of our brothers, what I consider to be the heart of the heritage they have left us.

My sharing with you is not just on the level of information. It is a question of forming our lives as the Lord formed theirs. So I want to present here to you, with the greatest possible clarity and conviction, the key to interpreting everything they lived through. In his message, the Holy Father told us that

The testament which Dom Christian de Chergé left behind contains the key for understanding the tragic event in which he and his confreres were involved, the final meaning of which is the gift in Christ of their life. "My life", he wrote, "was given to God and to this country".

So the basic key for understanding our brothers is the commitment of their lives to the following of Jesus. This principle of interpretation lets us enter into the mystery of the community of Our Lady of Atlas. The following of Christ implies a double reality. The first is dynamic, a movement. The second is static, remaining with him. Obviously remaining near Jesus depends on moving toward him. This double reality comes to form a single one made up of dedication and the gift of self. The person given to Jesus moves toward him so as to be transformed by him and in him. Unfortunately, and it is sad to say so, Christian and monastic life is full of persons who are "deeply moved," but hardly move at all.

A CHRONOLOGY OF DEATHS AND LIVES
Following Jesus to the Shedding of Blood

It was October, 1993. The Armed Islamic Group (GIA) has begun its aggressive action

against foreigners living in Algeria. Three foreign consular agents are kidnapped, then set free with the message that all foreigners must leave the country within a month. At the end of this one month period of grace, four foreigners are assassinated by the GIA as a proof that the latter's warnings are to be taken seriously.

On December 14, twelve Catholic Croats have their throats slit. The brothers knew then, since they lived in Tamesguida, only a few miles from the monastery. The GIA claims responsibility for the murders.

A few days later, the night of Christmas Eve, our brothers receive a visit from the GIA. The guerrillas are looking for financial aid, medical assistance and material supplies. They make an effort to win the monks over to their cause. As they depart they leave a promise: "We shall return."

The number of victims and the rhythm of violent incidents increase at a frightening rate. On May 8, 1994, the first official representatives of the Catholic Church in Algeria are killed: a Marist Father, Henri Vergès, and a Little Sister of the Assumption: Paule Hélène Saint Raymond. Father Christophe of Atlas writes in his diary: *This witness to you is given by your servants, both men and women: your friends. It has a long history and goes on, merged with the Eucharist.* (Journal [=Jnl], May 10, 1994).

Two Augustinian Sisters, Caridad María Álvarez and Esther Alonso, are assassinated on October 23rd. The next day Fr. Christophe comments that the killing took place *at the door of the church, at the time of the Eucharist which they truly celebrated.* (Jnl, Oct. 24, 1994)

Thus we arrive at November 25, 1994. The Bishops of Algeria write a message to their faithful flock in which they interpret the deeper meaning of all they are living through. With a remarkably contemplative insight they state that

In the present crisis in Algeria more than at any other time, our Christian vocation shines in all its purity. It is an invitation to follow Christ along the road on which he makes his life into an offering for the people. In this offering God expresses his tenderness for us all. We wish to live in Algeria God's covenant with all people, a covenant whose meaning the Bible has taught us throughout the history of salvation. We know that in this history God often used the faithful remnant of his people to save those who were to come afterwards. Such a vocation is common to all Christians wherever they may be, but our position as a minority in the midst of a muslim people gives it a very special dimension. The people for whom we are called to consecrate our lives recognise Islam as a religious way that is different from ours. The offering of our lives passes over this barrier of different religious identities and bears witness to God's plan for the whole of humanity, which is to bring about communion among all mankind. It is this plan that Jesus wishes to preach when he announces that the kingdom of God is near. He sets it in motion by his life, death and resurrection. John writes that it was necessary "that Jesus should die for the nation, and not only for the nation, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God" (John 11:51). (Letter from the Bishops of Algeria, Tunis, Nov. 25, 1994).

A month later, on December 27th, four White Fathers (Missionaries of Africa) in Tizi Ouzou are assassinated: Jean Chevillar, Christian Cheissel, Alain Dieulangard and Charles Deckers, *immolated with the Friend whom they have followed beyond the call of duty...*, as Fr. Christophe will write in his *Journal*.

Nine months later, on September 4, 1995, he writes again: *At night, before the beginning of Vigils, Christian announced that two of our sisters, Vivianne and Angela, had been assassinated this Sunday evening at Belcourt, coming out of Mass. I read and reread the Apocalypse. The reader must pay attention. Yes, it is you whom it is all about, Lamb slain yet conquering. It speaks of You, who are coming quickly. And I would like to be taken up in your movement of sacrificial life.* The next day Christophe continues: *The announcement yesterday night continues to speak to me: "Revelation of Jesus Christ," revelation from You: "Two of our sisters, Vivianne and Angela..," said Christian, who had evidently not slept much. Yes, among our sisters there are two who are sisters in a more particular way, in crucified Love.*

However, the wave of assassinations does not stop there. It continues to claim its many victims, among whom are some more religious. It will be Sister Odile Prévost who next gives the witness of her life, on November 10, 1995. Fr. Christophe tells us:

At the end of Terce, Christian announced the death of Sister Odile and Sister Chantal, Little Sisters of the Sacred Heart, who were assassinated in their own neighborhood. There is no other way for "the others" to become an offering sanctified by the Spirit and pleasing to God except by offering oneself in You, with You and through You. Chantal was only wounded (Jnl, Nov. 11, 1995, under the date of Nov. 7, 1995).

A few days later, on November 21st, the brothers of Atlas drew up a long detailed report to explain: *How We Embody the Charism of our Order in the Present Situation.* In this valuable document, which is a sort of communal identity card, we read:

After Christmas 1993, we all ratify our choice to live here together. This choice had been prepared by previous renunciations by each one of us (family, original community, country...). The violent death of one of us - or of all together - would simply be a consequence of this choice to live in the following of Christ (even if such a consequence was not directly foreseen in our constitutions!). Our bishop has often invited us by word and example to let ourselves be renewed like this, down to the very depths of the offering of our lives.

The Algerian Bishops, who were both pastors and theologians, discovered the vocation of the Church in Algeria in the midst of the crisis which the country was going through. Our vocation, they said, consists in "an invitation to follow Christ along the road on which he makes his life into an offering for the people." The declaration of our Brothers as a community finds its meaning in this living, contemplative context. There they say, "The violent death of one of us, or of all together, would simply be a consequence of this choice to live in the following of Christ." It was necessary that Jesus die for the nation, and not only for the nation, but also to gather into one the dispersed children of God! Whoever wants to serve me must follow me, and where I am, there also will my servant be.

GOD OFTEN REVEALS WHAT IS BETTER TO THE YOUNGER

Christian Discipleship and Marian Consecration

We return now to the chronology of blood and light which we began in the preceding paragraphs. But now we do it from another perspective, that is, from the experience of the youngest of our witnesses. This Carrier of Christ - Christophe - is the one who, on the night before Christmas of '93 when the group of armed guerillas visited the monastery, escaped with an even younger brother and hid in the basement until Vigils, fearing the worst.

Several weeks later, he told Christian what he had experienced that night. What happened to me, he said, *was first like running away, then the hours of waiting, and finally like rising up from the abyss*. He asked the Lord, *Where have you led me? Maybe you ask me to accept continuing my life, but can you ask me to accept the death of my brothers?* (Jnl, Jan. 16, 1994). Two weeks later he would write something else that refers to the incident: *A monk is nocturnal. How can I attain to intercession, vicarious representation and the prayer of supplication if I am still anxious about myself. In the darkness of the cellar last Christmas Eve you began to teach me this lesson when I believed that the others were in the hands of the visitors.* (Jnl, Feb. 4, 1994)

Similarly, when Christophe meditated on the community's experience of that Christmas Eve night, he wrote, *"We are in a state of epiclesis"* (*Relation*, Jan. 4, 1994). He could not have said it better or more succinctly. The *epiclesis* of the Liturgy is the invocation of the Holy Spirit to come with his divine action and consecrate the gifts presented by the Church in the celebration of the Eucharist. Underneath Christophe's words we hear those of the second Eucharistic Prayer: Let your Spirit come upon these gifts to make them holy, so that they may become for us the body and blood of our Lord, Jesus Christ. The blood that is shed in following Jesus is found again in the Eucharist.

The *Journal* written by Christophe starting on August 8, 1993, is the best commentary on, and complement to, the *Testament* written by Christian. What the latter composed in a few weeks, Christophe wrote over the course of two and a half years. For one as for the other, it was a question of describing a plan of life faithfully followed to its ultimate consequences. Christophe's *Journal*, begun in '93, has something special which sets it apart from previous diaries he had written. There is a conscious effort to discern God's will and what God is saying, with a view to interpreting it and speaking from God's point of view. On one of its first pages he writes:

Already in this notebook, which is a feast-day gift, there is a presence; there is you.
And she also comes in. Oh, I am far from not being in it myself. I am far from forgetting myself
in order to leave space for you, but I often write without looking at myself (too much).
I often write looking towards you.
Do you wish to teach me to write for you, for the service of your heart?
Am I inventing a mission for myself?
He who writes about the cross is a disciple. A child. The world is waiting for the words of this childhood.
The Deceiver is lying in wait to devour these words, to pervert them as soon as they are born.
I will write in the desert.
I will defend your cause. If your breath takes my hand, I will obey your language.
Hearing you tell me to take up my cross makes me realise that, to do this, I must leave what is occupying me (and preoccupying me): leave every other concern.
To follow you, totally lost in your own freedom. (Jnl, Aug. 1993)

In this context it is not surprising that Christophe - knowing *"that what we are, what is most precious in what we are ... has been given to us"*, asks himself, *"The words in this notebook, are they to be offered?"* (Jnl, Aug. 23, 1993)

Today, after knowing what happened, we can tell Christophe with all certainty, *"Yes, everything in your notebook was to be offered. You have not invented any mission on your own.*

We know from St. Benedict that God often reveals what is best to the youngest (RB 3,3). It is precisely you, the young revolutionary of May '68 - member of a generation that is supposedly "incapable of commitment"! - it is you who teach us by your journey from death to life that life has meaning only when it is given away.

1993: Beginning a dangerous commitment

On August 22nd the Catholic liturgy celebrates the Queenship of Mary. In the light of this liturgical commemoration, which was superseded that year by the Sunday celebration, Christophe feels moved to copy a text he had forgotten, but now finds to be significant. Finding this text again makes him wonder about its meaning for him now. The presence of the Woman is central. Our brother writes:

I re-copy this scrap of writing found again yesterday among other papers. I had written:

'Because of your body and blood, cries and tears, I have been able, I think, to be born.

The way ahead is open.

Very well. It only remains for me

to follow

at risk of you.'

Are these words true today?

I live at risk of you.

It is the Woman

who is drawing me

to this game. (Jnl, Aug. 22, 1993).

That Sunday afternoon news of killings arrive which crucify Christophe: *Assassinations in Algiers. After so many others. This notebook cannot remain protected from such violence, which pierces through my whole being.* The next day, Monday the 23rd, he still felt out of danger but, at the same time, invited by the Lord. He writes:

Yes. To be your body here exposes us to this violence which for the moment is not aimed at us. Wouldn't it be better if one man were to offer himself for this country? My servant, you say, will be where I am. I really have to follow you (Jnl, Aug. 23, 1993).

The community's retreat that year finished in the middle of December. Christophe ponders on his resolutions, fruits of his meditation and examination of conscience. He reflects as follows:

And so we have had our community retreat with Fr. Sanson. What remains of the points of the examen? Will there be some final decisive point for me to work on? Prayer? Yes, there is a point of adoration which you have placed at the end of a phase which I must live through, while moving without flinching towards that point...

Yes, I have made the impossible resolution, which I received from You.

It is love that pushes me to it:

This is my body: given.

This is my blood: poured out.

Let it be done to me according to your word; may your action pierce my whole being.

And this resolution - which is yours - goes infinitely beyond me.

Near the Woman (You, the Son born of her flesh, authorise me to call her 'Mom' and to take her to my home), my resolution is quite simple: I am. A resolution stronger than death. (Jnl, Dec. 22, 1993).

Ahead, the path toward the gift of himself is open. It passes through the Eucharist and through the Mother of Jesus. When he gives his consent, Christophe makes his own the words of Mary: *Let it be done to me according to your word.*

A few days later, on December 31st, the anniversary of his first profession, Christophe remembers the homily the Superior gave on that occasion. In the Islamic calendar it was the day of *Achoura* - from the Arabic, *achra*, "ten"; *achoura* being the tenth day of the month *Moharram*, - a day specially consecrated to almsgiving on which the wealthy are invited to give a tenth of their profits to the poor. Christian wanted Atlas to give 10% of its annual honey harvest to the poorest and most needy of their neighbors. In his homily at the profession ceremony, the Superior at the time, Father John Baptist, asked Christophe's Father and Mother, who were present, to offer one of their twelve children. "Profession," he said, "is the gift of oneself to God. As the verse which the young monk sings puts it, 'Receive me, O Lord, according to your word and I shall live' (Ps 119:116 and RB 58,21). This self-gift only ends the day of our death." That is why Christophe will write:

On that day of Achoura, December 31, 1976, Fr. John Baptist had spoken of the offering of 1/12 of my brs. and srs. Then he spoke of your hand. Also of the day of death as the true profession. In your hands, Mary, in your hands, Church in Algeria, I give myself to crucified Love that he may declare me well-beloved consecrated in your I am Way, Truth, Life.

These words of self-gift, through the mediation of both Mary and the Church in Algeria, are better understood if we remember that a few days before, on Christmas Eve, the community had received the visit of the GIA group commanded by Sayat-Attya. The armed guerillas made a particularly strong impression due to the fact that two weeks before the same group had assassinated twelve Croats who lived near the monastery. Moreover, the very day the above words were written, December 31st, the community had taken a series of votes which revealed a strong consensus in favor of staying where they were.

1994: A request for help and the search for meaning

Blessed Maria Gabriella Sagheddu is well known in the world of ecumenism, especially in Trappist monasteries. Pope John Paul II has proposed her as a model of spiritual ecumenism because of the gift of her own life for the cause of unity among Christians (*Ut unum sint*, 27). We celebrate her feast day on April 22nd. On that day Christophe remembers her affectionately, addresses her in Italian and asks her, with fear and trepidation, for her hand:

Maria Gabriella, Mia Sorella, dare I ask for your ...hand to help me? You succeeded in giving your life. Will I manage to do so, today? (Jnl, Apr. 22, 1994).

Throughout 1994 eight religious and priests fall victims of violent deaths. Christophe does

not forget them: *Paul-Hélène, Henri, Esther, Caridad, Alain, Jean, Charlie, Christian; they are all alive in your words, 'I am.'* (Jnl, Dec. 28, 1994)

In particular, the death of four White Fathers (Missionaries of Africa) on December 27th makes Christophe think about martyrdom. The subject had already been raised in the community dialogues. On July 17th Christian had written a meditation in memory of the first African martyrs, but the chief message concerned the Algerian martyrs of today. The latter were called "*Hidden witnesses of a hope.*" Christophe's reflections centered on a text written by Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, assassinated on December 29, 1170, for his fidelity to the Church. Thomas - and Christophe with him - wrote:

Christian martyrdom is not an accident. Still less can the martyrdom of a Christian be the result of a person's will to become a martyr, in the way that a person may become a leader by his own will and effort. Martyrdom is never the plan of man, since the true martyr is one who has become the instrument of God and has lost his will in the will of God. Rather, the martyr has not lost his will but found it, because he has found freedom in submitting to God. The martyr no longer desires anything for himself, not even the glory of undergoing martyrdom. (Jnl, Dec. 28, 1994)

There was something, however, that preoccupied Christophe even more. Apparently the GIA's plan against the White Fathers was not simply to assassinate them. They had thought of taken them hostage, which is precisely what will happen later to the seven monks of Atlas. From the perspective of faith, Christophe looks for a reply to the question troubling him:

Will you tell me (Christian Cheissel) if their true intention - stained with murderous madness - was to take you as hostages? I would like to know. I am thinking about it because of how this process might continue... in Algiers?, at Tibhirine. A hostage takes the place of others, but it must be a free commitment on his part, in order that this role of victim be filled with love and forgiveness. Jesus alone can draw us there, giving us a share in his role of being the Son who is infinitely Brother... As a friend of yours, I have to pray for your assassins. (Jnl, Jan. 4, 1995).

The conclusion here may strike us as a surprise. It is that the only way to become a Christian hostage some day is to pray for one's enemies.

1995: Asking for an immense grace

On July 25th the Church traditionally celebrates the feast of Saint Christopher, a martyred Roman soldier decapitated in Lycia during the persecution under the Emperor Decius. July 25th is also the feast of Saint James, son of Zebedee and brother of John the Evangelist. An ancient tradition associates him with the Christian victory over the Moslems in the battle of Clavijo, Spain, in 834. Ever since the eleventh century pilgrims from all over Europe come to his shrine at Santiago de Compostela to venerate this "Soldier of Christ." Father Christophe, however, writing in 1995, puts this context of war and victory over the Moslems totally to one side when he asks for a special grace, precisely on this feast of his own Saint. It is that he be identified with Jesus, the suffering servant and son of man who gives his life as a ransom for all...in Moslem territory (cf. Mk 10:45 and Is 53:11).

*I ask you on this day for 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 (Jnl, July 25, 1995).*

On the contrary. Christmastime, when God becomes a child, is a good moment to learn the lesson of being small so as to become great. It is this conviction that makes Christophe write the way he does a few days before Christmas:

*Since merely a yes
 is enough for you
 to do the impossible here
 take me, please.
 (Jnl, Dec. 21, 1995)*

1996: A Marian gift of self in the communion of saints and sinners

Christmas 1995 arrived. Christophe had made a crèche out of the *cashabia* (a camel-hair tunic with a large hood) of Henri Vergès, who had been assassinated the previous year. Christopher turned the hood into a cave, in which he put the little statues of the Holy Family. The symbolism was both eloquent and heart-rending. Christophe comments on it in his diary:

*Behold the lamb. He is here. Soon comes the marriage.
 In the folds of a cashabia - stronger than murder - it is he, born in the midst of
 us
 to be offered
 in our lives. (Jnl, Jan. 16 1996)*

The new life of this Child is stronger than any assassination and death. Very soon there will be shouts of joy and victory in heaven at the wedding feast of the Lamb (Rev 19:1-10). There is, however, still a path to climb. So the question which Isaac the Patriarch and Christophe the Monk ask as they climb Mount Moria is a good one (Gen 22:7): "Where is the lamb for the hill of sacrifice?" (Jnl, Jan. 17, 1996). It is still the time for struggle:

*The lamb and the dove above it are coming to set me free from the beasts
 struggling within me for my life. (Jnl, Jan. 18, 1996)*

Toward the end of January Christophe asks permission for a prophetic gesture. It was Sunday the 28th, the Lord's Day. He was speaking with his Prior about the priesthood. Five years had passed since his own ordination to the priesthood.

*I expressed a desire to Christian, whom I talked with this morning: "No stole
 should go over my cowl if I die, because the sign will have given way to the
 reality". It remains for me to allow the Holy Spirit to accomplish it and to make
 me a newly ordained priest of Algeria. (Jnl, Jan. 28, 1996)*

He has to be open to the action of the Spirit, so that the Spirit can bring to completion the anointing that took place at the time of ordination. It is the only way that the victim will be totally transformed into another Christ, another anointed one, another messiah. The priestly offering has been in a state of epiclesis now for over two years.

Three weeks later there is another prophetic gesture, this time not asked for but ready-made. The context of violence brings it forth and is its context. Not much time remains. Everything is almost ready:

Violence and bloodshed in the country again and again. I planted my second cross somewhere in the garden. Sister M-E made it and gave it to me. It is a Franciscan cross in the form of a T. I have put back round my neck the one made by Bernard (of Dombes). When will the time come to be planted at Tibhirine: planted in you, my Beloved? (Jnl, Feb. 19, 1996)

He is not trying to anticipate his burial so much as his being scattered as seed. If the grain of wheat does not fall to the earth and die it bears no fruit, but if it dies it bears much fruit.

March 19th arrives, the Solemnity of Saint Joseph, Husband of Mary and Patron of the universal Church. It is a day with strong Marian overtones that need to be brought into the open. It is the right moment to become an "offering".

Today is the anniversary of my consecration to Mary. Yes, I continue to choose you, Mary, with Joseph, in communion with all the saints - and I receive you from the hands of Jesus with the poor and the sinners. Like the beloved disciple, I take you to my home. Near you, I am what I should be: an offering.

Glad to be "an offering," Christophe adds, "*I was happy to preside at the Eucharist.*" And then: *It was as if I heard the voice of Joseph inviting me to sing Psalm 100 with him and the child: "My song is of mercy and justice; I sing to you, O Lord. I will walk in the way of perfection. When, Lord, will you come? I will walk with blameless heart."* (Jnl, March 19, 1996)

This is the finale of the sung symphony: Jesus, Joseph and Christophe singing in a trio, "*I will walk with blameless heart.*" They are the last words of the *Journal*.

Christophe's reflections prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that his *Journal* completes and points to his Prior's last *Testament*. The *Journal* -- this clear, bubbling stream of gentle water flowing from the faithful, generous, poetic heart of a French revolutionary of May '68 -- is a moving picture of growth toward the final act of giving one's own life. It is this same gift of self that we see captured in a flash of peaceful light, in all its radiant maturity, in Christian's *Testament*. Both works, the more concise one of the Prior and the longer one of the Novice Master, flow from a common reservoir of convictions shared by their whole community, which in no way takes away from their intensely personal quality. Both *Testament* and *Journal* are now treasured portions of our spiritual patrimony. Together, they show how the key to understanding the glorious *passion* of the Brothers of Atlas lies in the gift of one's own life for Christ and his Gospel.

A HERITAGE TOO BIG FOR US ***Coheirs in Solidarity with the Pilgrim Church in Algeria***

The small, suffering, eloquent Church in Algeria is faced with a frightening challenge. Many expect her to witness to the total following of the Gospel, even to the shedding of martyrs' blood. Christians and Moslems, believers and non-believers, have our eyes on this Church in Algeria, waiting for a dramatic gesture of hope in the midst of this broken world in which we live. Such an expectation goes beyond what human strength can do, though nothing is impossible for God.

This Church in Algeria is the true place where the memory of our brothers is to be kept

alive. She is the heir to the patrimony of our martyrs which is too big for us to receive alone. We want to be in solidarity with her, so that we can be true coheirs.

To be coheirs with this Church of martyrs we have to be completely open to monastic martyrdom and totally committed to a long life full of little pinpricks, shedding our blood in the patient passion of daily living.

Today, as on the day of our profession, we are called to say, "Receive me, Lord, according to your word and I shall live; do not disappoint me in my hope!" Our vow of *conversatio morum* can be understood as a promise to follow Jesus monastically. The way of obedience-silence-humility (RB 5-7), of good zeal and good works (RB 72 and 4), is our monastic way of following him. This is how we move toward the Lord and give ourselves to him so as to be completely transformed into him. In fact this is the only way that we can be witnesses and coheirs with the Church of martyrs that suffers and rejoices in Algeria. We know our own weakness, but let us pray confidently with Bernard of Clairvaux that there be a change:

"Draw me after you; we shall run in the odor of your ointment." It is indeed necessary that we be drawn, Lord, because the fire of your love has quickly cooled within us. We cannot run now as we did in former days, because of this coldness that freezes the waters of grace. But we shall run again when you restore to us the joy of knowing that you are our Savior: when the benign warmth of grace returns with the new shining of the Sun of Justice. The troubles that darken the sky like thunderclouds will then pass away. The soft breath of the caressing breeze will melt the frozen ointments and the perfumes will rise to fill the air with their sweetness. Then we shall run: run with eagerness where the fragrances draw us. The lethargy that now weighs us down will vanish with the return of fervor. We will no longer need to be drawn. We will be spurred on by the perfumes and run of our own accord. But meanwhile, until then, "Draw me after you." (SC 21:4)

There is still more. Communiqués 43 and 44 from the GIA (of April 18 and May 22, 1996) make it clear that our seven brothers were executed for being monks and Christians. We, too, are monks and Christians. Because of this we have a debt of forgiveness which we owe the GIA. We owe it, above all, to Abou Abdel Rahmán Amín, more commonly known as Djamel Zitouni, the head of the Armed Islamic Group and the person responsible for sentencing and beheading our brothers.

However, it is not just a debt of forgiveness that we owe to this last-minute friend. We also want to make a covenant with him, a covenant of fraternal communion. The mass media informed us on July 16, 1996, that Djamel Zitouni had died, a victim of the violence in which he had lived and believed. Djamel and Christian, please God, have met again in Paradise as two blessed thieves. Both one and the other, together with the other six, are our brothers forever. To all eight of them we want to say THANK YOU and A-DIEU. We see you in the face of God. And this heritage is too much for us, since it is without measure. But nothing is impossible for God!

With a fraternal embrace in Mary of Saint Joseph,

Bernardo Olivera
Abbot General