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In a world where inter-religious tension can lead to violence, Pierre Claverie, Bishop of Oran, was a witness to Christ's reconciliation. Here Jean-Jacques Pérennès, who works at the Dominican Institute of Oriental Studies in Cairo and is author of a best-selling biography of the bishop, describes his life and death.

One of the most moving moments of the year 2000 Jubilee celebrations was, without doubt, the commemoration of the witnesses to the faith of the twentieth century. Amongst the thousands gathered that night at the Colosseum with John Paul II, on the very site of the martyrdom of so many men and women of the early Church, were the families and friends of the recent victims from the Church in Algeria — the seven Trappist monks assassinated by Muslim fundamentalists; men and women religious who gave their entire life to serving the poor in that country; and Monsignor Pierre Claverie, the Dominican Bishop of Oran, whose strong and clear words became a model of how to stand up to Islamic fundamentalism. Where did this strength come from? Doubtless from a lively intelligence and great interior life, and from the fact that, throughout his life, he really was there for the stranger, the other: a challenge which is more necessary than ever, as shown by the tragedy of 11 September 2001.

A childhood in the 'colonial bubble'

Pierre Claverie was born in Algeria in 1938 at the time when Algeria was French. His family were *pieds-noirs*, in other words European Algerians who moved from France, Spain or Malta from the mid-nineteenth century onwards and who had settled down in what had been, since 1830, a French colony. At the time of Pierre's birth, the Claverie family had been in Algeria for four generations, which explains why he always considered Algeria 'his' country. Yet like most of the people of his background, until the age of 20 he grew up with no real contact with the Arab, Muslim world that surrounded him. This is what he said later of this time:

I lived my childhood in Algiers, in a working-class district of that cosmopolitan Mediterranean city. Unlike other Europeans born in the country or in the small towns, I never had any Arab friends: neither in the local primary school, where there weren't any, nor in secondary school, where there were very few, and by which time the war in Algeria was creating an explosive climate. We were not racists, just indifferent; unaware of the majority of the population. They were part of the landscape when we went out, part of the backdrop of our meetings and our lives. They were never our partners.

Of the then 10 million inhabitants of Algeria, Muslims nevertheless made up 90 per cent of the population. Pierre's parents were decent people, far from being colonial exploiters, but they lived in what he later called 'the colonial bubble'. He

became a Boy Scout, in a troop led by the Dominicans, but there, too, the colonial order was hardly called into question:

I must have heard many sermons about love of neighbour, since I was both a Christian and a scout, without ever realising that the Arabs too were my neighbours. I didn't get out of this bubble, as others were able to, to discover the world that was always around me without my being aware of it. It took a war for the bubble to burst.

This discovery of the lives and culture of those among whom he had lived happened at the same time as a quite painful spiritual journey which led him to religious life in the Order of Saint Dominic. He entered the noviciate in Lille, northern France, in 1957, and spent eight years at the renowned Saulchoir study house near Paris, where his horizons were greatly broadened. There he found brothers with strong anti-colonial convictions; others who came back changed men from their military service in Algeria in an army that is known to have sometimes carried out torture; and not least, the Saulchoir overflowed with rich personalities such as Father Anawati, who helped Pierre see things in new ways.

Learning the language

Early on, he knew he wanted to return to Algeria as a religious. He started learning Arabic, and acquired a basic knowledge of Islam and the Arab, Muslim culture. His parents left Algeria for good in the panic following the country's independence in July 1962. Pierre, however, was getting ready to go back — which he did in July 1967. His priority was to become familiar with the language and culture of the country. This he achieved in three years of dedicated study, providing him with a good mastery of Arabic: 'I must at all costs penetrate this language if I am to start to grasp the gulf separating us,' he confided in a letter to his parents in July 1968.

A rich network of friendship taught him the rest, the essential part being beyond words and learnt through a shared life, with all its joys, struggles and suffering. Pierre gave warm thanks to his Algerian friends in the cathedral of Algiers when he was ordained bishop in October 1981:

My Algerian brothers and sisters, who I am today I owe also to you. You have welcomed me and sustained me by your friendship. Thanks to you I have discovered the Algeria where I lived as an outsider all my youth, even though it was my country. Learning Arabic with you, I have, above all, learned the language of the heart, of fraternal friendship, where the races and religions of the world commune. There too, I am foolish enough to believe that this friendship will resist time, distance and separation. For I believe that this friendship comes from God and leads to God.

From that moment, Pierre put down roots in 'his' country, but the enthusiasm of that early time soon gave way to the stark demands created by the differences

between the cultures. Engaged in a process of decolonisation, Algeria was keen to reclaim its own culture and identity. Islam was an essential component of this, and the Christians of Algeria found themselves reminded of their status as 'guests in the house of Islam'.

After becoming bishop, Pierre Claverie requested Algerian nationality as a way of showing more clearly his indestructible bonds with the country, but he was never granted it. 'In the Muslim world, it is not nationality that means you belong, but religion,' he commented at the time, adding, with a hint of sadness: 'it's true that the more I live in Algeria, the more I realise, despite the strength and depth of my attachments to Algeria, that I am an outsider here.'

Despite it all, Pierre Claverie sought to be a point of contact between the two shores of the Mediterranean — in a time of globalisation, when the risks of turning in on yourself are great, he soon saw that it was in places like Algeria that a plural, and not exclusive, humanity might be created. For this he longed, and this became the catalyst for his thinking and his actions.

Christians in the house of Islam

When he arrived in Algeria in 1967, Pierre Claverie found a country very different from the one in which he had grown up — most of the foreigners had left and the country had thrown itself enthusiastically behind a project of social and economic development under President Houari Boumediene's leadership. Algeria was in a very promising, dynamic phase of its existence, an active member of the non-aligned countries, a leading promoter at the United Nations of a new international economic order. In Algeria, there were, among other things, education for all and free healthcare. All was boding well. The Church of Algeria played its part in this dynamism, seeing in the care for people and the service of the poorest a way of carrying out its mission in this new context, where the explicit preaching of Christ was neither possible nor advisable.

In 1970, Cardinal Duval gave Pierre Claverie responsibility for running the centre of studies in the Diocese of Algiers, where the Church's priests, religious men and women, and also young Christian volunteers prepared for a mission that greatly surpassed the tiny Christian population. The Church is there for others, not there to convert them, but to be amongst them as a witness, a sign of Christ's love for all humankind. Vatican II considerably renewed the approach towards missionary activity — the Declaration on Religious Liberty, *Dignitatis humanae*, solemnly proclaimed the need to respect each person's freedom of conscience; *Nostra aetate*, the conciliar text on relations with non-Christian religions, went further in declaring that the Catholic Church 'rejects nothing of that which is true and holy in these religions. She looks with sincere respect on those ways of acting, ways of seeing, those rules and doctrines, which although they differ on many points from what she herself holds and proposes, nevertheless often bring a ray of truth which illuminates all mankind' (NA 2). While adding of course that the Church is bound to proclaim at all times Christ

who is 'the way, the truth and the life', the Council thus offered new ways forward in inter-religious dialogue.

No common language

Pierre Claverie deepened his understanding of the meaning of a Christian presence in the Muslim world. The creation in Rome in 1971 of a secretariat for non-Christians helped the setting up of important Islamo-Christian symposia which took place in Córdoba in 1974, in Tripoli in 1976 and again in Córdoba in 1977. These symposia were of interest, but it quickly became apparent that even with the best will, there was no common language, no common understanding of terms as essential as 'revelation' and 'prophet'. And so Pierre Claverie grew convinced that this approach was not the best way to go forward in this dialogue in truth. He never participated in these great meetings, preferring his daily work shoulder to shoulder with Muslims.

He had become bishop in 1981, and then in 1987 became a member of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, the new title of the secretariat for non-Christians. This gave him the chance to work out a more nuanced version of the rather complacent enthusiasm he found in some dialogue 'specialists':

For there to be dialogue and not just two monologues, one after the other, otherwise known as a 'dialogue of the deaf', everything must start, on both sides, with a question. If all we have to offer each other are affirmations, we will only get past the level of simple sharing of information if we enter into polemic... So rather than thrusting forward our own truths, wouldn't it be better to listen to each other and to listen together to the questions posed by the changes in our world?

Pierre Claverie was skilled at being outspoken, and at the three plenary meetings of the Pontifical Council where he took part, his warmth, and the sharpness of his analysis, were appreciated.

He became more than ever determined to counteract the polemical context in Algeria that was leading to a sort of smugness towards Christianity and all that was different. The country was deeply affected by 130 years of colonial rule, and was making every effort to reclaim its identity. It did this, among other ways, by arabisation. The lack of arabised Algerian professors meant this arabisation was hastily confided to teachers from the Middle East, who then spread reactionary and even xenophobic ideas. A certain number of them had been 'generously' exported by their countries where they had been judged undesirable. And so it was that on Algerian television, an Egyptian sheikh, al-Ghazâli, took his chance to attack the West and Christianity, and his remarks were relayed to mosques and seminaries of Islamic thought. All this created the unhealthy atmosphere that Pierre Claverie openly denounced. 'I think we are going to go through a difficult time,' he predicted in 1985. Against easy and untruthful unanimity, he offered the conviction that 'the starting point of all co-existence can only be openness that comes from true and exacting mutual knowledge'. It is to this end that he directed

his own efforts, with warmth, but mindful of the truth.

Living on the fault lines

In 1988 riots shook Algeria. The government was forced to make concessions and put an end to the single-party regime of the FLN which had been in power since independence. The first party to profit from this relaxation was the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), which performed very well in the first free elections. Democrats were shocked by the result, as was Pierre Claverie — how could 25 years of more or less socialist development lead to this? Faced with the threat of an Islamic fundamentalist victory at the elections of January 1992, the authorities, controlled by the military, broke off the electoral process and began procedures to outlaw the FIS.

The Islamic fundamentalists then decided to conquer by arms what they were not allowed to conquer by the ballot box. Pierre Claverie at this time placed himself firmly on the side of the democrats — with many friends from all parts of Algerian society, he was well informed and made a precise analysis of the situation. Indeed, he had a gift for explaining the challenges facing Algerian society, which made him a sought-after commentator, both in his country and abroad, by those troubled by the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. Often against the advice of his entourage, who asked him to be more prudent, he agreed to interviews and conferences as his form of resistance. He admired the courage of the women's movement and was very close to it, and he considered it his duty to speak out, since he was able to, and not to give in to the threats of the fundamentalists. Like the women who continued to go to work, like the journalists and artists who braved the reactionary prohibitions they were threatened with, he too continued to say loud and clear that you are not destined to reject those who are different from you, and that there is a blessing in accepting them.

The cross at the centre

For him this was not just a political conviction — when he commented on the *Prison Letters* of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, he showed the spiritual meaning he gave to his fidelity:

When we follow Jesus, we are sent to be servants of the Good News of reconciliation between God and all humanity. This ministry does not place us as intermediaries between God and humanity, but it transforms us into mediators, entirely for God and entirely for the world, placed with Jesus at the point where history and the Reign of God meet. And this place is a Cross, the Cross is at the centre of this mission. Jesus died stretched between heaven and earth, his arms reaching out to gather together the children of God scattered by the sin that separates them. He placed himself on the fault lines that this sin has created. Our human and social relations, thrown out of harmony and broken, find in him healing and reconciliation, for he took them upon himself. He places his disciples on the same fault lines with the same mission of healing and reconciliation.

From 1994, when the Church in Algeria suffered its first victims, many friends advised the Christians of Algeria to leave the country, for the time being, until times were better. But Pierre Claverie was convinced that the Church's place was right there, out of faithfulness to Jesus' witness, but also with the secret hope that this witness of pure love would contribute to bringing together Christian and Muslim:

Since the beginning of the Algerian drama, I have often been asked: 'What are you doing there? Why do you stay? Shake off the dust from your sandals! Go home! Home ... Where is home? We are there because of the crucified Messiah, and because of no other thing and no other person! We have no interest to defend, no influence to maintain. We are not driven by any sort of masochistic perversion. We have no power, we are just there, as it were, at a friend's bedside, a sick brother's, silently, grasping his hand, wiping his brow. Because of Jesus, since it is he who suffers here, in this violence that will spare no one, crucified again in the flesh of thousands of innocents. Like Mary his mother and St John, we are there at the foot of the cross where Jesus dies abandoned by his own and mocked by the crowd. Isn't it essential for Christians to be present in places of dereliction and abandonment? Where would the Church of Jesus Christ be, itself the Body of Christ, if it were not first of all here? I think the Church dies if it is not close enough to the Lord's Cross. However paradoxical that may seem, and St Paul argues it well, Christian strength, vitality and hope, the Church's fruitfulness, all this comes from there, and from nowhere else and in no other way. The Church deceives itself and deceives the world when it puts itself forward as one power among others, like a humanitarian organisation or a spectacular evangelical movement. Then the Church will indeed shine, but not with the fire of God's love, 'strong as death' as the Song of Songs puts it. Because we are indeed talking about love here, love first and last, and Jesus has given us a taste for this passion and shown us the way. 'Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends...'

On 1 August 1996, a few weeks after the seven Trappist monks of Tibhirine, Pierre Claverie was assassinated along with Mohamed Bouchikhi, a young Algerian Muslim who had stayed faithful to Pierre despite the risks. At Pierre's funeral, the Muslims outnumbered the Christians, and many of them spoke of having lost 'their' bishop. He is still an example for many Algerians who do not side with intolerance and the rejection of their neighbours. When we speak of inter-religious dialogue and our poor words take us no further than the threshold of a difficult encounter, the blood of Pierre and Mohamed, mixed together, reminds us of the friendship that mocks the boundaries set up by men, for in Pierre Claverie's own words, friendship 'comes from God and leads to God'.

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