

Muslim neighbors: A French monk's testimony

by [Karl A. Plank](#) in the [December 12, 2006](#) issue

A few days after Christian de Chergé's death on May 21, 1996, his mother opened a sealed letter and read what he had written three years earlier. Islamic terrorist groups had begun killing foreigners in Algeria, where De Chergé, a Frenchman, was prior of a Trappist monastery. Anticipating his own death, he wrote down his last testament. In our current global climate, his words provide a startling contrast to language that tends to pit the Western world against the Middle East and to equate Muslims with terrorists. De Chergé saw Islam as a gift to the world, and especially to Christians, for whom Islam demonstrated the essence of sacrificial love that is at the center of the Christian gospel. His testament highlights a commitment to risking his life by living in solidarity with the Muslim neighbors he loved.

As a child, de Chergé had lived in Algeria while his father, a ranking military officer, was stationed there. When he saw Muslims at prayer, de Chergé asked his mother about them, and she taught him that they must always be respected; they worship the same God. This was the beginning of a belief in kinship between Muslims and Christians that de Chergé claimed throughout his life. When he became a monk and made his vow of stability at Tibhirine, he recognized the commonalities between his monastic life and the villagers' practice of Islam: a commitment to regular prayer, times of fasting and penance, the high premium placed on hospitality, and an ethos of submission to the will of God. The villagers saw the same "common places" in the monks: in the villagers' eyes, the monks were good Muslims.

De Chergé's deepest encounter with the soul of Islam came in 1959, when, like his father, he was serving in the military and stationed in Algeria. He became friends with Mohamed, a village police officer who worked for the French authorities. Although Mohamed supported decolonization, his job with the French government—and his friendship with de Chergé—put him at risk of violence from the National Liberation Army. One evening when the two were walking, de Chergé was accosted by a violent group. Mohamed intervened and rescued his friend from

danger, only to be assassinated himself on the following day.

In this act of giving his life, Mohamed dramatized for de Chergé the implications of his own gospel: that no greater love exists than in giving one's life for another. From that point on, de Chergé's calling was to the embodiment of that love, lived out particularly in relation to the Islam that had dramatized it for him and in connection with Our Lady of Atlas monastery in Algeria, where he made his monastic vows.

In Mohamed and in the life of the villagers at Tibhirine, he saw the soul of Islam and recognized its Christ-likeness. His wish was that at death he would see the children of Islam as God sees them: radiant with a glory that transcends religious and ethnic distinction. Though differences do exist, they cannot estrange or obscure the fundamental communion of God's children.

In October of 1993, the Groupe Islamique Armé (GIA), a militant Muslim group, kidnapped three French consuls in Algeria, then freed them with the message that all foreigners had one month to leave the country. On December 1, 1996, assassinations began, and on December 14, the GIA beheaded 12 Croats at Tamesguida, only a few kilometers away from the Trappist monastery at Tibhirine.

On December 24, while the monks were preparing for Christmas Eve offices, six armed members of the GIA entered the monastery, led by Abou Younes Sayat-Attiya, the man responsible for the deaths of the Croats. De Chergé spoke with Sayat-Attiya, reminding him of the monks' commitment to peace and refusing any attempts by the GIA leader to draw them into collaboration. When de Chergé explained that the monks were preparing for Christmas, Sayat-Attiya left. But he added, "We will be back."

After Christmas there were ecclesial and governmental attempts to offer the monks refuge or provide them with a military presence, but the Trappist community rejected the proposals, saying they violated the integrity of the monks' calling. They reaffirmed their commitment to remain at Tibhirine as witnesses for peace and companions in solidarity with the local Muslim villagers. The monks were abducted by the GIA on March 27, 1996. Fifty-six days later, on May 21, 1996, the GIA announced the beheadings of de Chergé and six of his *confrères*.

De Chergé's testament, translated by Donald McGlynn and excerpted here, expresses how he wished his life and his death to be understood:

When an "A-DIEU" takes on a face.
If it should happen one day—and it could be today—
that I become a victim of the terrorism which now seems
 ready to engulf
all the foreigners living in Algeria, . . .
I should like, when the time comes, to have the moment
 of lucidity
which would allow me to beg forgiveness of God
and of my fellow human beings,
and at the same time to forgive with all my heart the one
 who would strike me down.
I could not desire such a death.
It seems important to state this.
I do not see, in fact, how I could rejoice
if the people I love were to be accused indiscriminately of
 my murder.
To owe it to an Algerian, whoever he may be,
would be too high a price to pay for what will, perhaps, be
 called, the "grace of martyrdom,"
especially if he says he is acting in fidelity to what he
 believes to be Islam.
I am aware of the scorn which can be heaped on
 Algerians indiscriminately.
I am also aware of the caricatures of Islam which a
 certain Islamism encourages.
It is too easy to salve one's conscience
By identifying this religious way with the fundamentalist
 ideologies of the extremists.
For me, Algeria and Islam are something different: they
 are a body and a soul. . . .
This is what I shall be able to do, if God wills—
immerse my gaze in that of the Father,
and contemplate with him his children of Islam just as
 he sees them,
all shining with the glory of Christ,
the fruit of His Passion, and filled with the Gift of the

Spirit,
whose secret joy will always be to establish communion
and to refashion the likeness, playfully delighting in the
differences. . . .
Amen. In sha 'Allah.