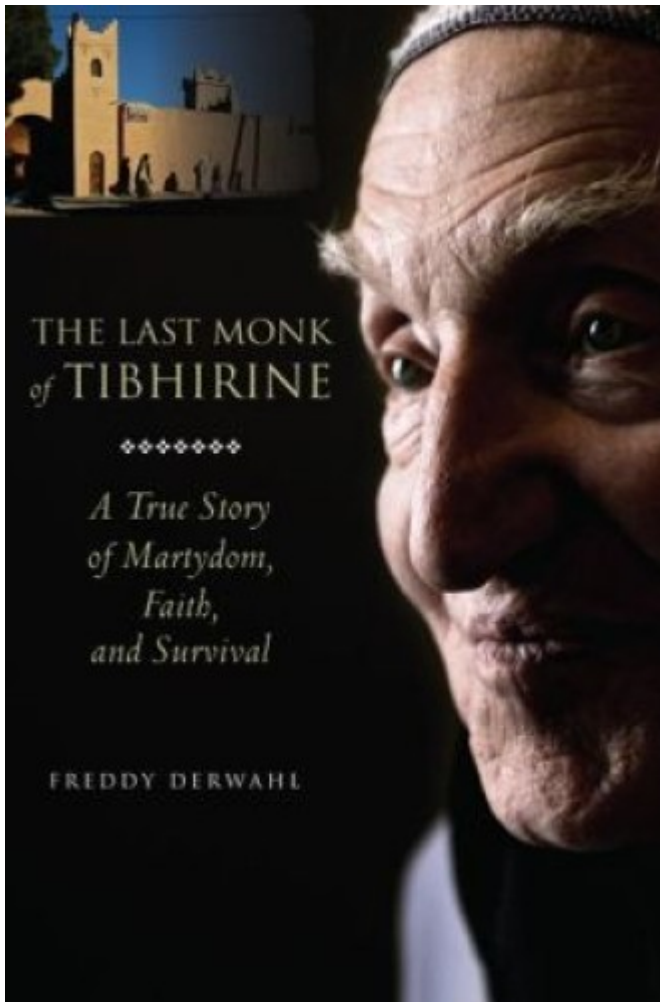


Of monks and men

by [Paula Huston](#) in the [March 19, 2014](#) issue

In Review



The Last Monk of Tibhirine

By Freddy Derwahl
Paraclete

I was mesmerized by the 2010 movie *Of Gods and Men* and grateful to director Xavier Beauvois for sparing me a death scene at the end. I knew the seven monks being marched into a swirling snowstorm would never return, and I could not bear

to watch them murdered. It was enough that, thanks to the vision of producer Etienne Comar, I'd been invited inside the monastery walls, where each of the monks had finally come to the same difficult decision: to stay despite the threat. It was enough that I knew they'd freely accepted the possibility of their own brutal deaths and had already forgiven the men who would kill them—the Algerian rebels they invariably referred to “our brothers from the mountains.”

Only later did I allow myself to wonder about that unfilmed scene. Were the monks held captive for weeks or months before dying? Were they able to maintain their vows in the midst of such terror? When death finally came, was it quick or did they suffer? And what about the two who were spared—were they racked by relentless survivor's guilt?

Freddy Derwahl provides at least some of the answers. As a prospective monk at the Algerian Trappist monastery of Tibhirine, Derwahl had come to know both the community and the monks nearly ten years before the 1996 abduction. In July 2011 Derwahl went to a monastery in Morocco to visit Brother Jean-Pierre Schumacher, one of the two Tibhirine monks who were not killed. He stayed in the monastery there for some weeks, reacquainting himself with the quiet rhythms of a life he had ultimately not chosen, participating in the daily schedule of worship and prayer, and spending hours in conversation with the 87-year-old Jean-Pierre.

During their first meeting in nearly 25 years, Derwahl found the elderly monk “in good spirits,” wearing an “impish smile that concealed great kindness.” Wise, serene, and seemingly unburdened by the horrors of the past, Jean-Pierre took him to a small room dedicated to the memory of his seven brothers. Their portraits hung on the wall above a seven-armed lamp, and a copy of Prior Christian de Chergé's famous last testament sat on a podium nearby. Jean-Pierre is now the last of the Tibhirine community; the other survivor, Brother Amédée, died several years ago, and Jean-Pierre believes it is both his privilege and his responsibility to recount the legendary story from his own monastic and insider perspective.

Along with recording that story, giving a historical overview of the Algerian political developments that led to civil war, and filling in many of the biographical blanks left by the movie, Derwahl keeps a spiritual journal of his own. His entries, along with the evocative color photographs of the monasteries of Midelt and Tibhirine by Bruno Zanzoterra, go some way toward making sense of the mystery of martyrdom. For example, one night when he was trying and failing to sleep because of the

constantly barking dogs outside the monastery walls, Derwahl wondered whether the monks might have found a depth of faith no longer experienced in the West: “As I reflect on the men who sleep in this house, I realize they are serious, yet relaxed. . . There is nothing they have not endured. This is a completely different kind of Christianity than we encounter in old Europe.”

Certainly the words of those who died lend credence to this speculation. Prior Christian, fully aware of how dangerous their situation had become, wrote his last testament two years before the abduction. In it, he assured his family and friends that he did not want to die, much less seek martyrdom. The death of a martyr, he explained, extracts far too high a price afterward: there is always a murderer who will be blamed and who will have to live with his own guilt. But knowing that he would almost certainly face a violent end, Christian concluded his letter with a loving message to the “friend of my last moment who does not know what you are doing,” expressing the fond hope that the two of them, victim and murderer, will see one another again in Paradise, “like the fortunate thieves” who were crucified on either side of Christ.

At the end of the book, Derwahl leads us gently but inexorably through the scenes the movie did not show—the several months of captivity in the mountains, the recording of Christian’s voice released by the rebels as they negotiated for an exchange of prisoners, the abrupt decision of the French government not to deal with the terrorists after all, and the subsequent decapitations of the seven. By the time we get to this chapter, we are more than prepared for the worst—and surprisingly unsurprised by Jean-Pierre’s calm, loving response to the news of his brothers’ murders. When a young novice begins to weep, Jean-Pierre takes him into his arms and says, “Don’t be sad. What has happened here is something amazing, and we have to live up to the greatness of it.”

Like so many others, I found *Of Gods and Men* to be one of the most powerful movies I’ve ever seen. I am grateful to Freddy Derwahl for his beautifully paced, profoundly reflective, and spiritually moving portrait of monasticism at its most heroic. In our sometimes cynical and despairing era, this book shines like the star-studded sky over Tibhirine.