

NEW SCANDINAVIA LUTHERAN CHURCH

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"From All Saints: Daily reflections on saints, prophets, and witnesses for our time" by Robert Ellsberg, p.233 for the feast day of Christian de Cherge' and companions, celebrated on May 21.

"If it were ever to happen.... That I should be the victim of the terrorism that seems to be engulfing all the foreigners now living in Algeria, I would like my community, my church, my family to remember that my life was given to God and to this country."

With these words, Father Christian de Cherge, prior of a Trappist monastery in Algeria, began a letter to his family which he sealed with the notion, "To be opened in the event of my death." The letter was opened three years later after de Charge and six of his fellow Trappists were murdered by fundamentalist rebels in 1996. In their deaths they joined a long procession of past victims- both Christians and Muslims- sacrificed to one another's conception of the glory of God. But unlike many Christians martyrs of the past these Trappists did not offer their lives for the conversion of their Muslim neighbors, but as a witness to the One God of all, and for the cause of friendship among all God's people. For Father de Cherge, at least, it was the repayment of an ancient debt.

In 1958, as a young man of twenty-one, he had served as a French soldier fighting Algerian rebels in the war of independence. It was a war marked on both sides by exceptional brutality. But on day, during an ambush, his life was saved when a friend- who happened to be a devout Muslim- shielded him with his own body. This man's sacrifice, which de Cherge believed was motivated by religious faith, prompted his won conversion- a process that led him to the priesthood and ultimately to the Trappists. After studies in Rome, he asked to be assigned to Our Lady of Atlas monastery in the highlands near Algiers. Many French religious and missionaries had fled the country after independence in 1962. But, at the urging of the Catholic archbishop, the Trappists had stayed on to offer a contemplative Christian presence among their Muslim neighbors.

The monks lived a traditional Trappist life of prayer and work. But they made a point of offering a place where Christians and Muslims could pray and talk together. De Cherge himself was an avid student of the Qur'an. A building in the monastery enclosure had been offered for use as a mosque. Thus, "the sound of chapel bells mixes with the Muslim call to prayer."

To many of their neighbors the monks were trusted men of God. But to others- fundamentalists, who felt increasing resentment toward the secular policies of Algeria's military government- the French Trappists were foreign infidels. As a later rebel dispatch put it, "They live with the people and draw them away from the divine path, inciting them to follow the Gospel."

By 1993 the country was on the verge of a violent rebellion. An ultimatum, issued by the rebels, warned all foreigners to leave the country. But the monks decided to stay. They also declined an offer of military protection. It was then that Father de Cherge wrote his last testament and mailed it to his family in France. In the following years a number of priests and women religious were killed. But still the monks remained. As de Cherge wrote, "for us it is a journey of faith into the future and of sharing the present with our neighbors, who have always been very closely bound to us." In putting on the Trappist habit they had all left their families and their country to follow Christ. "Now all that is left us is to give our blood to follow Christ to the end."

The end came in 1996 when rebels invaded the monastery and seized Father de Cherge and six other brothers and marched them into the mountains. Several weeks later, on May 23, the rebels announced, "We have cut the throats of the seven monks... Glory to God!" The heads of the monks were discovered the next day. They were buried in the small cemetery of the monastery.

At his point, remembering his sealed letter, de Cherge's family discovered his prayer of forgiveness for his murderers and hops that their action would not contribute to negative stereotypes about Islam or Algeria. "For me, Islam and Algeria... are body and soul." He offered thanks for all his friends and family. But he reserved his final words for his murder, "You too, my last-minute friend, you who know not what you do. Yes, for you, too, I wish thinks thank you, and this adieu which is of your planning: May we be granted to meet each other again, happy thieves, in paradise, should it please God, the Father of both of us. Amen! In sh' Allah!"

Thoughts from Pastor

Over the last few months, I have included stories of people who have given everything in their following broken world. I ask for prayers for all who share God's love in our communities, our country, and the whole world, that God holds all of us in God's grasp and that the Holy Spirit guide us in ways that show the world what love really looks like. The work God calls us to do is not easy and God knows that. Jesus continually reminded the disciples of the challenges, but he also reminded them that they were never alone. The workers at Our Lady of Atlas monastery know the challenges but they also know that God's love was bigger and needed to be shared, no matter the threat. There are people in the world today, even within our country, who claim to be Christian but will fight to keep this message of Love from being shared with everyone. But what do we do? Remain silent?

God's peace be with you.

Pastor Sara