

# Mission Letter

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FROM THE MISSIONARIES OF AFRICA (WHITE FATHERS)

June 2018

Dear friends of the Missions,

Four Missionaries of Africa will soon be beatified as martyrs of the catholic faith. They are included in the 19 martyrs of Algeria, known as **Monsignor Claverie and his companions**. They were killed in Algeria between 1994 and 1996, and are recognized having died because of hatred for the faith (odium fidei) according the new classification for martyrdom.



**From top left to right: Fr DIEULANGARD Alain (1919-1994), Fr CHEVILLARD Jean (1925-1994), Fr DECKERS Charles (1924-1994), Fr CHESSEL Christian (1958-1994).**

Those White Fathers were killed on the 27<sup>th</sup> December 1994 at Tizi Ouzou (Algeria).

In this group are included one Marist brother & a sister of the Assumption (8/05/94), two Augustinian sisters (23/10/94), 4 White Fathers (27/12/94), 2 sisters of Our Lady of the Apostles (3/09/95), one sister of the Sacred Heart (10/11/95), seven Trappist monks (21/05/96), and Bishop Claverie (1/08/96).

The film “Des Hommes et des Dieux” has made known the death of the 7 monks at Tibhirine. On the 24<sup>th</sup> of December 1994 Islamist terrorists disguised as policemen came to the residence of the Missionaries of Africa at Tizi Ouzou, and after locking up the cook and his daughter in the kitchen, killed our 4 confreres with machine guns in the courtyard. They knew that their lives were endangered but chose to remain in Algeria in solidarity with the local population.

Since our foundation in 1868, 50 of our confreres experienced violent deaths in Africa, but not all of them were killed for hatred of the faith; for example the 2 Canadian White Fathers who were killed at Entebbe airport during a coup attempt by general Idi Amin.

But how will this beatification be understood in a Muslim country such as Algeria? Mgr. Desfarges, bishop of Algiers made the following statement: *“We are aware of the fact that our 19 martyrs brother and sisters are but a drop in the ocean of violence which fell upon Algeria during those years, and we cannot think of our martyrs without thinking of all the martyrs of Algeria; those who have also given their lives in faithfulness to their faith in God and their conscience. I think of the hundreds of Imams who died because they refused to sign and approve the **fatwa** justifying all the violence. I think of all the intellectuals, journalists, writers but especially ordinary people, men and women, parents who refused to obey the armed groups”*.

We agree with the statement made by bishop Desfarges. We must put this beatification of martyrs in its historical context. The 19 Christian martyrs are a very small group in relationship to the 200,000 Moslems who died during the 20 year civil war in Algeria. Our Moslem brothers and sisters were equally martyred in faithfulness to their faith and their commitment to truth and justice. Since our foundation in Algeria, we have followed the instructions of our founder Cardinal Lavigerie that insisted that our presence in this Moslem country was not for proselytism but for religious dialogue and to assure the presence of Christian witnessing.

During all these years the Missionaries of Africa have understood that their ministry was not to convert Muslims to our faith but to witness with signs of compassion and friendship and to show our readiness for interreligious dialogue. We wish to imitate Jesus who readily encountered all his contemporaries with respect. Faithfulness to Jesus implies being attentive with compassion to the human situation in which we find ourselves without condescension.

Reaction of the local population to the death of the 4 Missionaries of Africa: On that terrible day, the chief of police called a representative of our community to give him the bad news. He was crying and asking for forgiveness because he could not prevent it. Many friends and acquaintances expressed their shock and regrets before the incomprehensible event. At the funeral, the whole town was there to show their disapproval for this cowardly act and the crowd chanted in a loud voice: “these were men of God in whom we put our trust”. They could not have paid a higher compliment to these confreres.

With the approval of the Algerian government, it has been decided that the beatification will take place in Oran during the month of September. This will be a good opportunity to pay tribute to the sacrifice of so many Algerians, who lost their lives, to save their country. There is no question of opposing different memories; it is an opportunity to recognize the sufferings of 35 million Algerians during that period.

It has been announced by the Vatican that the Holy Father pope Francis will be travelling to Algeria later this year and will preside at the beatification of these martyrs.

**Fr. Mike Merizzi, M.Afr.**

*We thank you for the continued support of your prayers  
and of your financial contributions.  
United in prayer.*