Monks and Muslims II
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Creating Communities of Friendship

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Introduction

“Monks and Muslims: Creating Communities of Friendship” was the theme of a Monastic/Muslim dialogue that took place in Qum, Iran, from September 28 to October 3, 2012. The fifteen Muslim participants were professors, administrators, researchers, and students from various universities and educational institutes in Qum, especially the International Institute for Islamic Studies, whose Director is Dr. Mohammad Ali Shomali. The nine Benedictine and Cistercian participants came from monastic communities in Belgium, England, France, Germany, Holland, Italy, Kenya, and the United States. The conference was jointly sponsored by the International Institute for Islamic Studies and Dialogue Interreligieux Monastique-Monastic Interreligious Dialogue.

The conference theme was divided into four subsections: The Place of Friendship in the Bible and the Qur’an, Friendship as a Spiritual Discipline for Monks and Muslims, Friendship as the Prerequisite and Goal of Monastic/Muslim Dialogue, and From Enmity to Amity: Remembering the Past, Envisioning the Future. These published proceedings do not present the papers in the order they were given but rather begin with two chapters that deal with concrete instances of Christian/Muslim relations, one from the recent past (Christian de Chergé and the Cistercian community of Tibhirine in Algeria) and the other from the first century of Islam (the Prophet Muhammad and his first followers). The chapters that follow then explore the scriptural, theological, spiritual, philosophical, and practical bases for friendship between monks and Muslims.
Most of us who came together in Qum had taken part in a Monastic/Muslim dialogue in Rome the previous year. The follow-up meeting in Qum was therefore an occasion to deepen the bonds of friendship that had already been established. The monastic participants were deeply moved by the warm, generous, and always attentive hospitality not only of the Iranians who hosted the conference but also of the Iranian people at large, many of whom were intrigued by our monastic garb—which we also wore when going from our hotel to the conference site and when visiting shrines and educational institutions—and would approach us to ask who we were and to welcome us to their country.

Qum is the most important religious and educational center in Iran, and its numerous shrines and schools give evidence of how much ritual prayer (salāt), supplication (duʿā), pilgrimage, and theological/philosophical reflection shape the Shiʿa tradition of Islam. There are some 60,000 seminarians in Qum, in addition to thousands of other students, many of them women, who are enrolled in the various institutions of higher learning in the city. In the area of religion, most study and research is understandably focused on Islam, but Qum also has a University of Religions and Denominations, which we visited, and Dr. Shomali’s Institute has as one of its goals the training of professional and competent researchers to introduce Islam in general and Shiʿite Islam in particular in religious and scientific centers in the country or abroad and in international seminars and interfaith dialogues.

Ritual and personal prayer gave a particularly monastic tone to this dialogue. Visits to various mosques and shrines provided opportunities for personal prayer and meditation. Monastic Lauds and Vespers were prayed before and after the formal sessions of the dialogue, but the monastic hour of Sext (midday prayer) and the Muslim *dhuhr* (noon prayer) took place in the prayer room of the International Institute for Islamic Studies, with monks and Muslims silently participating in each other’s ritual prayer.

May continued prayer and dialogue extend the bonds of friendship to an ever larger number of Christians and Muslims, so that in God’s good time friendship may become the most common and fitting way to describe the relationship between the followers of these two religions.

William Skudlarek
Friendship in Tibhirine

Monastic/Muslim Dialogue in Algeria

Godefroy Raguenet de Saint-Albin

“Friendship is something mysterious. Something big. . . . It is broad. It is deep. It is beautiful. It is good. It is true.”¹ These words of Brother Christophe, poet and monk of Tibhirine, introduce us to the different dimensions of the mystery of friendship. Speaking of friendship as a mystery does not mean declaring it to be the exclusive privilege of believers, be they Muslim or Christian. But it certainly acknowledges the ability of believers to recognize friendship as a gift of God. Our focus here leads us one step further, since we will be using the example of the community of Tibhirine to speak of a friendship that can unite Muslims and Christian monks on their way to God.²

Tibhirine shows us that when we speak of friendship, we need to speak concretely. Friendship calls for experiential truth, beyond just good ideas. It is an experience that is fully human, and therefore can be truly spiritual, that is, related to the always


² A personal note: Although I never met the martyred monks of Tibhirine, the testimony of their life and death is, in large part, what led me to monastic life. Their writings introduced me to their experience. I also shared daily life with the two survivors of the Tibhirine community during several stays at the Trappist monastery in Morocco over the past four years.
greater mystery of God, *Allahu akbar!*, to God who is greater than us and all our thoughts, feelings, and deeds, while being mysteriously present and provident to all of his creation and merciful to all human beings.

Tibhirine was a community of Cistercian monks who for years remained totally hidden in the Muslim region of the Maghreb. It was fragile, composed of brothers who, humanly speaking, had little in common. Because of their dramatic kidnapping and execution, the light of martyrdom, *shahadâ*, shone on them and testified to their love for God and the people of Algeria. Theirs is a very real story, fashioned by humanity, earth, hospitality, religion—a story for which the experience of friendship was foundational. It is also a story that needs to be placed in the broader history of the place where this monastic presence was planted and then grew until it was uprooted during a decade of violence.

### Some Benchmarks in the Story of Monasticism in Algeria

To situate the story of the monastic community of Tibhirine in the long and rich history of Algeria, one would have to reach back to the centuries in which Christianity flourished in North Africa, to the figure of Saint Augustine, to the country’s divisions, to the Muslim conquest.³ If we limit ourselves to the more recent history of a monastic presence in Algeria, we see that Trappist monks arrived only thirteen years after the French conquest in 1830. One figure from this period who should be mentioned is Sheikh Abd-el-Kader, chief of the local resistance and a prominent politician, but also a Sufi of great stature. He was a close friend of the first bishop of Alger, Antoine-Louis-Adolphe Dupuch. After his exile in France, Sheikh Abd-el-Kader was responsible for saving many Christian lives in Syria.

³ During his time at the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies in Rome, De Chergé, future superior of the Tibhirine community, studied the spiritual history of Algeria.
The first monastic settlement was established in Staouëli, seventeen kilometers north of Alger, in 1843.\textsuperscript{4} It rapidly acquired a certain notoriety thanks to the rapid economic development made possible by the use of modern agricultural techniques. This was precisely the reason it was supported by the French political authorities, even though they were mostly antireligious. Right from the beginning, therefore, the monastery was saddled with all the ambiguities of a colonial system. In line with the thinking of the time, it was founded to bring “civilization” to a barbaric population. Even so, Sheikh Abd-el-Kader valued the religious presence of the monks and explicitly praised Dom François-Regis, the first abbot, for their sense of hospitality.\textsuperscript{5} Nonetheless, the monastery had to close in 1904 because of antireligious laws.

Thirty years later, a second monastery was established in the area of Médéa, at Tibhirine (the name means “the garden”).\textsuperscript{6} This time its style and spirit were different; its search for ways to collaborate with the local population brought it much closer to the sense of brotherhood exemplified by the former Trappist Charles de Foucauld.\textsuperscript{7} Thanks to its acceptance (one could even

\textsuperscript{4} The founding monastery was Notre-Dame d’Aiguebelle, in southeastern France, at the time a large community of about two hundred monks.

\textsuperscript{5} “I have heard about you a long time ago because my men spoke of you monks. You always received them as though they were your own brothers.” In John W. Kiser, \textit{The Monks of Tibhirine} (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2002), p. 37.

\textsuperscript{6} The community of Our Lady of Atlas began as a refuge for a group of monks in exile from Slovenia who came to Ouled-Trift (Algeria) in 1934. The community was transferred to Ben Chicao in 1935 and then to Tibhirine, seven kilometers from Médéa, in 1938. It was later assumed by the French abbey of Aiguebelle, which sent some monks to the community. Soon thereafter the foundation became an autonomous monastic community.

\textsuperscript{7} Charles de Foucauld, emblematic Christian figure of the time, “converted back” to the Christianity of his childhood through his encounter with Islam in Morocco. He became a Trappist monk in France and Syria and then left the Trappists to start an amazing spiritual journey toward universal brotherhood in Palestine, Morocco, and Algeria among Touareg
say “adoption”) by its neighbors, the community managed to pass through the war of independence (1954–1962) unscathed. But the situation of the Algerian Church had by then changed dramatically. Most of its members, the one million of “pied-noirs” (Frenchmen born in Algeria), departed for France in a massive exodus, leaving behind only a tiny remnant of Catholics. The energy of Archbishop Léon-Etienne Duval of Alger, who had clearly supported the Algerian population and its legitimate desire for independence, convinced the monks to stay, despite the impossibility of local recruitment (conversion was not allowed). He believed the mere presence of a Christian monastic community, whatever the nationality of its members, in the midst of a Muslim people, was of capital importance.

Following independence, successive governments maintained a mixture of authoritarian socialism and Muslim law, but were marred by a high level of corruption. In 1990 the Islamist party won a large majority of votes in the first free elections. In elections for the legislature in 1992, the Islamist party had similar success in the first round, but the army cancelled the second round of voting. Violence then erupted between the ruling powers and factions of the GIA (Groupe Islamiste Armé [Armed Islamist Group]). Two years later the murders of foreigners and Christians began.

The community, whose life was devoted to work and prayer, became more and more committed to daily dialogue with its Muslim hosts and so decided to stay in spite of the danger. On December 24, 1993, Christmas Eve, the monastery was “visited” by the same Armed Islamist Group that had killed twelve Croatian Christian workers, friends of the monastery. The Prior, Christian de Chergé, resisted the demands of the leader, Saya Attya. For a while the community seems to have benefited from

tribes. He was killed in Algeria in 1916. Despite his desire, he never managed to found a community of disciples to continue to live his deep immersion in a Muslim environment. The fruits would come one generation later with the flourishing of communities inspired by his life. We know that each of the seven martyred monks of Tibhirine felt a spiritual bond with Charles de Foucauld.
his “aman,” until he was killed. On several occasions the monks renewed their decision to stay, choosing to remain faithful to their neighbors and to the God who had called them to search and serve him there. Finally, on the night of March 26–27, 1996, seven monks were captured (two were not found and left behind) and, after being held for two months, were executed, as announced by a communiqué of the GIA dated May 21.8

Friendship: A Foundational Experience

Each member of the 1996 Tibhirine community had his own history with Algeria, most of them because they had been, in different ways, involved in the war of 1954–1962. The elder, Brother Luc, a doctor who never ceased to provide medical assistance to the local population, arrived in 1946. Among those who had recently come from other monasteries to join Tibhirine, some had worked with Algerian immigrants in France and often became friends with them. It would be worthwhile to speak for a moment of these various experiences of friendship. I will mainly speak of one: the story of the friendship of Christian de Chergé and Mohammad.9 I do so not because their friendship was exceptional—although it was, in a sense—but because De Chergé became the superior in charge of the little community of Tibhirine, and his friendship with Mohammad became a gift that he shared with others as he fostered the community’s trustful daily dialogue and strove to establish a common horizon of hope.

This story of his friendship with Mohammad, which dated back to 1959, was one that De Chergé related much later on several occasions.

8 It is still uncertain whether or not the police and Algerian secret services were involved in one way or another in this operation. The severed heads of the monks were discovered two days later.

9 Their names are powerfully symbolic, but they are, in fact, their real names. For the sake of clarity, I will for the most part refer to Father Christian as De Chergé rather than Christian.
Having reached the age of adulthood and confronted—along with the rest of my generation—by the harsh reality of the war [i.e., the War of Independence against France], I was graced to encounter a mature and deeply religious man who set my faith free. He taught me how to live my faith by responding to the tough demands of daily life with simplicity, openness, and surrender to God. Our dialogue was one of peaceful and trusting friendship, whose horizon was the will of God, beyond the turmoil.10

Let me simply call attention to some of the features of this relationship between a young seminarian who had been sent to Algeria as an officer and an older Algerian Muslim that made them true friends, in spite of the fact that they were caught in the middle of a war. First, a recognition of the faith, the religion (iman and islam), and the spiritual value of the other that went beyond deep respect; and secondly, the reciprocity of this relationship, despite its obvious asymmetry. In some ways, it looks like a relationship of spiritual initiation, even though De Chergé was an officer in charge of pacifying the area. At the same time, Mohammad had certainly discerned the precocious spiritual awareness of his young partner in dialogue.

During a common patrol, they were ambushed, and Mohammad intervened, trying to protect De Chergé from the fellagha’s fire. The next day he was found murdered next to his well. As De Chergé said later, Mohammad did not want to choose between his brothers and his friend. He would never forget Mohammad’s gift of life to save him, and this event became decisive for his call to monastic life. “In the blood of this friend, I understood that my call to follow Christ should sooner or later be lived in the same country where I had received the proof of the greatest love.”11

All of De Chergé’s monastic life will be related to this “pact of blood.” More than a debt, this pact developed during the

11 Ibid.
following years into a vocation: a call to return to Algeria to live a presence of prayer. In fact, knowing that Mohammad’s life was at risk because of his cooperation with the French authorities, De Chergé had once promised to pray for him. His friend appreciated his offer but replied, “You will pray for me! But Christians don’t know how to pray.” To which De Chergé could only confess that prayer was often neglected by Christians and lacked a communitarian visibility. For him, a fraternal Christian presence in Algeria after the drama of war would have to assume a communitarian dimension—which was the unfulfilled wish of Charles de Foucauld. In the aftermath of Independence, when most Christians left the country and the Church was reduced to a tiny group, the community of Tibhirine understood the meaning of its presence in Algeria to be “men of prayer in the midst of men of prayer,” thus echoing De Chergé’s own wish.

The Sign of the Greatest Love: Promise and Gage of a Common Future

De Chergé’s reference to Mohammad’s gift of “the greatest love” recalls Jesus’ words to his disciples at his Last Supper with them: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you” (John 15:12-14). This “greater love” is the love of Jesus, his life offered to his friends-disciples, and sign of the love of God for the whole of humanity, stronger than its fears and violence, stronger than death. But the commandment entrusted by Jesus to his disciples opens up a path of selfless love for everyone, a path that also leads to friendship with him and with the one and only God he calls his Father. It inaugurates the possibility of participation in the divine love that has no boundaries of time, location, or (as De Chergé would add) religion. His friend Mohammad, who fulfilled the commandment of love, is the proof and the sign that this promise is for all, and can be received through friendship among believers. This “recognition”
in no way annexes Mohammad to Christianity. On the contrary, in God it eludes all barriers of religion. Mohammad’s gift of life was in fidelity to his Islam, just like the gift of life made by Jesus, whom De Chergé later liked to contemplate as truly Muslim, the servant of God (‘Abd Allah) whose loving submission (Islam) is perfectly fulfilled by the dwelling of His Holy Spirit.12 His deepest conviction of faith was that his friend already enjoyed the joy of God, with all saints (‘Awlyy Allah) living in communion with Him.

Furthermore, this event naturally became a “memorial” in De Chergé’s religious life. For Christians, the Eucharist is the foundational memorial, the life-giving dhikr, of the selfless gift of Jesus. Celebrated every day by the monastic community, this liturgical prayer became for De Chergé a rendezvous with his friend, and it enlivened his hope of a promised communion between Christians and Muslims. Mohammad had become part of this “horizon of the will of God” that he used to share with him.

Thanks to his Muslim friend, De Chergé had taken a giant step on his spiritual journey. For him, this event of the past shed the light of divine promise upon all present relationships between Muslims and Christians. De Chergé became the prophetic watchman, seeking to open, in the midst of a harsh present, the path toward an already foreseen future of communion. Because of the gift he had received, he was now entrusted with the mission of becoming, with his brothers, a living sign of this promise in the land of Algeria.

### Hospitality and the “Vulnerability” for Friendship

De Chergé owed his vocation to become a Christian monk in Algeria to a Muslim friend, and his monastic life grew in friendly

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dialogue with Islam. The mystery of Islam fascinated and questioned him, allowing his Christian faith to grow. For him, being a monk in Algeria implied taking the promise-filled risk of a daily encounter with Islam: “Algeria and Islam, it is a Body and a Soul,” he would write in his Testament. But it would take time and patience before he could see the realization of his hope, because the community he entered in 1971 did not immediately share his prophetic stance. Many were afraid of his audacious proposals, his commitment to study Arabic and read the Qur’an, to fast during the month of Ramadan—all of which troubled a well-established monastic routine. Despite a long history of daily contact, real generosity, and even a certain friendship with their neighbors, some monks had very little interest in Islam. This was the case with Brother Luc, the *toubib* (doctor), who treated people (bodies and souls) for free, with an incredible dedication and attention to each, doing so from 1946 until the end. He was, far and away, the monk who was most cherished by a grateful population. For De Chergé, Islam was the friend of each day, to whom neighbors and coworkers gave a face as Mohammad did, even if their Islam could be distorted (in particular, as we will see, when Islamism led to barbaric violence and terror).

De Chergé’s push for greater dialogue had a decisive impact on the community. Nevertheless, a form of dialogue awakened by hospitality was already constitutive of the life in Tibhirine. Over the years the community came to a deeper understanding of this hospitality, recognizing that it had the specific gift of being a small, poor, and isolated community. The monks began to value their situation of being guests of a foreign country who lived according to a different religious tradition, in which God the All-Merciful is obeyed, served, and loved. Precariousness, relative poverty, and dependence on the good will of their hosts made them vulnerable in two senses: they were more receptive to difference, and thereby open and “vulnerable” to

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13 In 1975 they received an order from the police to leave Algeria within fifteen days. They prepared to do so, but the Archbishop clarified the situation: the order was linked to inner rivalries for political power.
establish friendship with their hosts. To these “searchers of God” on pilgrimage to the Wholly-Other (Al-Ghayb), the other (Muslim, Algerian) appeared as a companion, even an ally, since he was himself searching for obedience to God. De Chergé therefore speaks about difference as a “sacrament” of God, a gift that calls for sharing in dialogue and friendship, in order to enrich both and build communion.

It is also no accident that De Chergé was attached to the figure of Abraham, who in both our traditions is an example of sacred hospitality and is uniquely referred to in the Bible’s Old Testament as the “friend of God,” Al-Khalîl Allah (e.g., Isaiah 41:8: “But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend”). Hospitality is probably one of the best words for friendship, because both experiences have so much in common. Is it not true that to be a friend means being hospitable by opening one’s heart to someone else? Is it not to know and hope for one’s friend, beyond what the friend knows and hopes for him- or herself, and thereby to open an unexpected future for our friend? De Chergé spoke of spiritual life as a process of (re)birth, in which the friend, the other, the one who is different, is the necessary midwife. But only God is able to move the depths of the human soul, the level at which real friendship comes into being.

As guestmaster—that is, the monk responsible for hospitality in the name of the community—De Chergé was attentive not to offend the faith of Muslim guests by the use of Christian symbols, a kind of courtesy typical of his character and convictions. At one point the community willingly agreed to lend to their neighbors an unoccupied room on the border of the monastery to be used as a mosque. Muezzin and bells in close dialogue! As friendship requires, hospitality had started to become reciprocal. A no less significant sign of this reciprocity was the cooperative work the community developed with several neighbors. After

14 “Seeking God” is the main indication of a monastic vocation for Saint Benedict, author of our Rule of life.
Independence the monks got rid of most of their land, keeping only what was necessary to provide for their needs. Later on, they decided to work the land together with their neighbors, allocating parcels and sharing machinery, seeds, and water. They also shared the profit of the products (fruits and vegetables) sold on the market. This activity brought the monks into daily and close contact with the population, sharing the hopes, joys and sorrows of the families.

The “Friend of One Night”
and Friendship’s Openness to the Universal

Soon after his arrival at Tibhirine, De Chergé received confirmation from a Muslim that his hope for common prayer was not in vain. He later recalled this person as “the friend of one night.” Following the last community prayer and after he had attended to the needs of the guests, De Chergé liked to remain in the chapel for private prayer. One night in September 1975, the voice of a young Muslim guest began to echo his own prayer to God through Christ. For several hours the chapel resounded with the polyphonic praise of two voices, a marriage of Muslim and Christian prayer, offered in one same Spirit, to the one and only God. Some years later, along with some members of the community, he participated in the Ribât-es-Salâm. Created in 1979, it was a group of Christians who were committed to the encounter with Islam. Soon thereafter, it was joined by a group of Sufis of the tariqa ‘Alawyya.

Friendship is always a personal, singular encounter. But it carries a vocation to blossom, to open up to all humanity. All the more if the two friends are believers, truthful seekers of God their Creator. Friendship is a school of the universal. Trustful, comforting, reciprocal relationship with a friend can be this

15 The experience of love bears its own kind of fruit, although marriage can certainly include friendship.
school’s laboratory, for in the shared experience of friendship identities expand as one offers hospitality to otherness in the person of the friend. In friendship the capacity to love can develop and expand until it becomes universal, including even the presumed “enemy,” who is, in fact, a “potential friend.”

Related through his friend to an (eschatological) future of communion in God, De Chergé’s awakened heart was able to find in ordinary relations—as long as they were open to this future—the taste of authentic spiritual friendship, the taste of God. However, the word “friendship” is not very frequent in his writings, especially compared to his use of the word “brotherhood.” Many times these two words appear as close as synonyms. In the Christian tradition, the language of brotherhood traditionally suggests the requirement of a universal extension of love (through will and reason, rather than in a sentimental sense—especially when it comes to enemies!). All people are created by the same unique God, and therefore are brothers and sisters of one other. But De Chergé stressed also the Christic dimension of this unity, as he said strikingly that in Jesus, the Word was made brother, indicating that the Word of God entered into friendship with all people. De Chergé was able to experience this brotherhood/friendship in what he called the “existential dialogue” of an everyday life shared with simple people that was a foretaste, even an anticipation, of the communion of saints. Far

16 Over the last five centuries, because of an excessive fear that friendship could lead to passionate exclusivity, Christian tradition and theology were often very opposed to close friendship among monks and other vowed religious. Because of a fear of what “particular friendships” could lead to, the ideal promoted was that of a rational (not emotional) universal love that extended even to the enemy. However, the early generation of the Cistercian branch of Christian monasticism (twelfth century) is characterized by experiences of and reflection upon friendship as an authentic spiritual gift, even a manifestation of the common vocation to love. Aelred of Rievaulx’s well-known On Spiritual Friendship corresponded to the De Amicitia of Cicero.

17 In French, “Le Verbe s’est fait frère,” paralleling John 1:14: “The Word was made flesh.”
beyond Cicero’s classical definition of friendship as mutual accord concerning things divine and human, orientation or openness to God became for De Chergé the true criterion of friendship. This way of understanding friendship implied an awareness that God takes the initiative, is the initiator and the “third partner” of this relationship, although, because of divine transcendence and immanence, God remains totally different from the two friends.18 Brother Christophe says it beautifully: “There is someone between us. . . . It is He who is between the one and the other when they are friends.”

The monks of Tibhirine were in harmony with their Cistercian monastic tradition and especially with Aelred of Rievaulx, the twelfth-century author of On Spiritual Friendship. Aelred argued that antiquity’s insightful understanding of friendship had to be reinterpreted in the light shed by God’s revelation: the plan of the Creator brought a depth and breadth, unimagined by the pagans.19 Brother Christophe was, in fact, recalling Aelred when he dared to assert that “God is friendship,”20 altering the famous statement of Saint John that “God is Love.” Humanity was created to participate in God’s friendship, and despite the selfish perversion of the human heart, God’s saving grace opens the eschatological horizon of the communion of saints, where the “glue” of purified feelings (like joy and pleasure) will join the action of will and reason so that we may live a universal love. Loving one’s enemies, so unnatural in this world, is a commandment of Jesus but cannot proceed from human feelings. The gift

18 See Matthew 18:20: “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” Surprisingly, Christian reflection upon friendship has often forgotten this inspiring sentence of Jesus.

19 Aelred quotes many passages from the works of Cicero but adapts them to Christian views. An appeal to morality is the first way he criticizes the old definition (two robbers can form a pair of “friends”). But his main point is God’s role of Creator and Merciful Savior.

20 Christophe quoted Aelred in his text/testimony of 1994. See Aime jusqu’au bout du feu, p. 108. Referring to Jesus as God’s crucified Love, he even states, “It is a historical fact: God is friendship.”
of friendship is seen here as a “school” (as Saint Benedict designates the monastery) in which we learn eternal and universal love in God over the course of our earthly pilgrimage.

**Monastic Life in Dialogue: Islam as the Friend of Each Day**

The monastic “school” at Tibhirine found great accord with its neighbors’ practice of Islam. De Chergé, who had studied Islam and Arabic (most intensely during two years in Rome), was greatly disposed to search for harmonies between the two different traditions. He was not motivated by fear, which tries to negate differences and forge a superficial “concordance” between the two traditions. Rather, his was the humble posture of a man of desire, full of hope and thirsting for a Truth that is always greater than our thoughts, minds, and deeds. When he was elected prior in 1984 and placed in charge of the community, he knew that he was in need of the light of “the other” in order to enter more deeply into his own tradition, and then to go deeper still until he reached the depth where all paths merge into the mystery of God.

Two images from ordinary life symbolized this dialogue: the well and the ladder. De Chergé enjoyed the friendship of a young Muslim whom he helped on his spiritual journey. They spoke about their conversations as a time when they dug their well. Once De Chergé asked his friend somewhat provocatively, “What kind of water do you think we will find at the bottom of the well: Muslim water or Christian water?” His friend responded, both pained and amused: “You still don’t know? What we will find is the water of God.”

In Tibhirine, as in any monastic community, two or three hours each day were devoted to prayerful reading and meditation on the Holy Scriptures. De Chergé’s knowledge of Arabic enabled him to engage in a “dialogical” practice of lectio divina by reading the Holy Qur’an in “parallel” with the Bible. His friendship with Mohammad had grown into a friendship with Islam, and he
referred to Islam’s Holy Scripture as a “gift of God to nurture the taste of Him.” He felt it was a part of his prophetic mission to offer hospitality to the Holy Qur’an in his *lectio divina*, letting the echo of the Scripture of others make itself heard in his own as a pleading friend. And this form of dia-logue (i.e., sharing a common word) helped him to listen to the Word of God at a deeper level.

The traditional image of the spiritual ladder was one that De Chergé used quite naturally. He imagined a ladder where one side is Christianity/monasticism and the other is Islam, with both sides holding the many common rungs we need to climb: memory of God (*dhikr*), fasting, prayer, the spiritual pilgrimage, sharing with the poor, etc. But our traditions also cherish common values like obedience, trust, poverty of heart, humility, the spirit of childhood, as highways toward sanctity. Friendship also has a place on the list, even though it is not very high on the list in the Christian tradition. If we are to climb up the rungs of the spiritual ladder, mutual recognition is needed to keep them horizontal. Humble respect of the other’s gift along with friendship for the other makes it far easier to climb the ladder.

The *Alawyy* Sufi had a slightly different understanding of the ladder image that was used to describe Tibhirine’s experience of “monasticism in dialogue.” They spoke of an A-shaped step ladder, where one side of the “A” is Islam and the other is Christianity. One side needs the other, otherwise one will never get off the ground. Climbing together, each rung brings one closer to the Muslim or Christian friend and closer to God. On this ladder each tradition maintains its own way of climbing the rungs, but is enriched by the other tradition’s way of using the “tools of good works” as Saint Benedict calls them. We could easily add many of them to the above list: conversion of heart, a constant sense of the divine presence, trust in providence, the urgent need for boundless hospitality, the call to spiritual combat, etc. In all of them we see the action of the unique Spirit of holiness, whose “secret joy is always to establish communion and restore resemblance by playing with the differences,” as De Chergé put it in his Testament.
A passage from the Qur’an expresses very well for De Chergé his own perception of Christian monasticism in dialogue:

Had God willed, He could have made you one congregation. But He thus puts you to the test through the gifts He has given each of you. Vie then with one another in good works. To God is your final destiny—all of you—then He will inform you of everything you had disputed. (5:48)

This mutual emulation of good deeds is the “salt” of the encounter. It includes the necessity of duration, faithfulness, and perseverance. Friendship, a relationship that has God as its horizon, does not happen overnight, and De Chergé knew the Algerian proverb: “Two men can say they are friends only when they have together consumed a ton of salt.”

Thanks to a long and fruitful practice of existential dialogue (he did not have much time for the dead ends of “theological” dialogue), he was really committed to establishing connections between the constitutive elements of monastic life and the practice of Islam (‘Arkân ad-dîn). Even the call of the muezzin was regarded by the monks as a call to prayer, a reminder of their vocation to live continually in the presence of God. In the last years, they would stop their liturgy as a sign of respect if the muezzin was calling.

The Friend of the Last Minute: A Responsibility for All

De Chergé’s singular experience of friendship with Mohammad had definitively opened his heart, broken the “natural” barriers of mistrust and fear. His mystical awareness enabled him to live and relate with others at a level of depth, where humanity

21 The image of salt in relationships is common to many cultures. Early in his spiritual journey, De Chergé quoted Aristotle: “People have to grind a lot of salt together to become friends.”
is truly one, as it is in the eyes of God. But in the final years, as Algeria descended into an ever deeper spiral of violence, his prophetic hopes were sorely tried, as were the hopes of all people devoted to peace and friendship between religions. In the people of Algeria, it was humanity that was suffering violence. The time came for this friend of Islam to stand watch for the truth of Islam against its perversion, time to stand watch for humanity, in the name of those who “forgot” theirs by killing their brothers. And finally, the time came to follow Muhammad, to follow Jesus, in the “greater love.” At its summit, friendship may well involve a rendezvous with death, because, as Brother Luc would say in a striking summing up of his hope, “Death is God.”

The now well-known Testament of De Chargé can, in fact, be heard as the Testament of the whole community of Tibhirine. Through his teaching and example the prior certainly helped his brethren to be open to the otherness of Islam, as well as to overcome their sharp differences of temperament that at times had made community life quite explosive. The depth of communion they reached, which impressed all those who visited Tibhirine during the last two years, was clearly the work of God.

At the end of his Testament, De Chargé addresses his thanks to his friends from Algeria, including his possible murderer, whom he calls “the friend of the last minute”:

And you, the friend of the last minute, who won’t have known what you were doing; Yes, for you also I want this MERCI, and this farewell foreseen by you. And may we be granted to meet again, happy thieves, in Paradise, if God wills, Father of both of us. Amen! Insh’Allah!  

De Chargé speaks of an A-Dieu as he introduces his testament. The ordinary formulation would be adieu (meaning “farewell”), but he writes it as two words, which literally mean “(rendezvous)-by-God.” And at the end, he repeats the word A-Dieu, but associates it with MERCI, meaning both “thank you” and “mercy,” a reference to the All-Merciful, El-Rahman, whom he will encounter through death. The richness of the last sentence is even greater because of the allusion to Levinas, the Jewish philosopher, and his concept of visage (face). For him the human visage carries God’s
The literary genius of the writer is obvious, but De Chergé’s Testament is not just rhetoric or poetry, and this for several reasons. First of all, if we take seriously his conception of friendship as a gift of God and a call to greater intimacy with Him, he would owe his face-to-face encounter with God, his entry into the communion of saints, to this paradoxical “friend” who would cause his death. De Chergé once quoted this hadîth to the community: Abraham said to the Angel of Death: “Did you ever see a friend make his friend die?” And God revealed to him: “Did you ever see someone who loved disdain the encounter with the One he loves?” And he writes in the Testament that God cannot be absent from this event, brutal though it may be. They [his community, church, and family] should accept that “the unique Master of all life could not be stranger to this brutal departure.”

But De Chergé, along with his brother monks, also clearly said he did not wish that any human brother would be the author of his martyrdom, especially if it be an Algerian and a Muslim, who would murder in the name of a distorted image of a religion he respected and cherished.

We read in the Bible that the story of humanity after the creation of Adam and Eve started with violence: Cain murdered his brother Abel because his own offering had been disregarded by God, who accepted his brother’s. Cain refused to obey God’s call to dominate his violence and to be the safe-keeper of his brother. He murdered Abel, and by doing so “killed” the humanity (that subsisted) in both of them. De Chergé was inspired by the passage of the Qur’an referring to this story: “Whoever kills one

commandment “You shall not kill,” which is the first step for human coexistence. De Chergé’s offering of his life, in a Jesus-like way, “saves” the murderer from the consequences of his transgression. (We can think here of Louis Massignon and his interpretation of Hallaj’s martyrdom.)

23 See Aiguebelle’s edition of De Chergé’s talks to the community, Dieu pour tout jour (Abbaye Notre-Dame d’Aiguebelle, 2006), p. 111. The greater love is the threshold of the mystery where life and death are overcome. Therefore, in the Gospel of John, the cross of Jesus is also the throne of his glorification by God.
single man, if he is not guilty of murder, or sedition, is considered to have killed the whole humankind” (5:32). And the following sentence is no less expressive: “Whoever has saved one single man is considered as if he had saved the whole humankind.”

To be a friend of God implies becoming the brother and friend of all, responsible for their humanity, even if the price be one’s life. Looked at this way, hospitality in Tibhirine had reversed: men of peace, the monks had become the hosts of their neighbor’s hope, hosts of their lives threatened by the surrounding folly of homicide. De Chergé had come to accept his death long before he actually died: since he became a monk his life was already freely given, dedicated to God and the Algerian people. But he also felt that they had been entrusted with the mission of staying in solidarity with the people of Algeria, of standing watch to “save” the humanity of those who forgot theirs by violence and killings and in doing so distorted the true visage of God. He endeavored to see and protect in each human being, even those who had been led astray, the vestige of God, the hidden intimacy of God with all creatures. And he perfectly knew the price of this stance. By the time De Chergé was writing the end of his Testament, the “friend of the last minute” had for him

24 The second category of exception (fassâd, sedition) can lead to several interpretations. There is a parallel tradition in the Mishna (Sanhédrin, 4,5).

25 The monks called the Islamists “brothers of the mountain,” and the government armed forces the “brothers of the plain.” By using this terminology, they refused to take sides for one against the other, but rather freely chose to remain in brotherhood with both, refusing the law of violence they tried to impose. And Luke, the doctor, cured people without discrimination. It is worth noting that the Catholic religious murdered in Algeria were all persons of communion and not proselytes, people deeply involved in relationships of social support and friendship, with ordinary people. Radicals from the two sides of the conflict tried to impose the law of violence as the only “solution.”

26 An anecdote demonstrates this reversal of hospitality. As the community had to discern if they should stay or leave, De Chergé once told a neighbor they were like “birds on a branch.” The neighbor answered: “But we are the birds, and you are the branch: if you depart, we have nowhere to go.”
the visage of Sayah Attia, the “visitor” of Christmas night 1993 and author of more than one hundred deaths, who had promised to come back. This night he had managed to “disarm” the terrorist, by looking at him as a fellow human. Face-to-face, himself “disarmed,” he had firmly resisted Sayah Attia’s requests, addressing the man’s faith and humanity that were deeper than his murderous deeds. He persevered afterward in calling him his friend, just as Jesus did not exclude from his friendship the disciple who was about to betray him during his last supper.

This leads to a third dimension of this “friendship of the last minute.” In his Testament, De Chergé confesses himself to be a “thief,” meaning by this that he had lived long enough to know that he too is an accomplice of evil and violence. But he also calls himself a “happy thief” because he confesses this in the light of divine mercy. If there were no conversion, then standing watch for all, hoping for every human in the name of God, would be mere idealism, a cheap dream.

In this Algerian tragedy, De Chergé recognized the dramatic opposition between love and hatred, between Light and darkness, the frontline of which goes across the heart of each human being. Here is where the true jihad begins. By confessing the evil in his own heart as well as his complicity with it, De Chergé, a pure-hearted man if there ever was one, whose desire since childhood had been to serve God,27 engaged in true solidarity with all humanity, including evildoers. He accepted the destiny of the righteous of all times who suffered persecution, and entered into the mystery of salvation of Jesus Christ. His relationship with his brother monks was a daily call to conversion from evil to God, from his own violence to peace, from his reflex of revenge to forgiveness. If not in fact, then in vocation and hope, the other, brother and friend, remains the road that leads to friendship with God and brings healing to the human heart.

27 When he was eight years old, his grandfather found a piece of paper on which he had written “I shall be a priest.”
Deeply affected by the atrocities that surrounded him, moved by compassion for his neighbors, feeling that his humanity, his faith and his hope were being beaten down, De Chergé repeated this prayer, addressed to the God of Peace: “Disarm me, Disarm us [monks], Disarm them [murderers of both sides].”

The Heritage of Seven Friends of God

The “excess of violence” between 1992 and 1996 became for the threatened monks a call to an “excess of love.” The commandment of Jesus to love one’s enemy appeared more urgent than ever. It called them to greater conversion, to purifying their hearts still prone to violence, to practicing gratuitous love, and to growing transparency to the Spirit of holiness. Brother Christophe, to whom this final section will give voice, put it this way: “Our prayer of beggars engages us more deeply in this mystery of friendship for the Glory of God and for the sake of the world. . . . This friendship (extended to all) is entrusted to us as a mission.”

A man of great sensitivity (he fought against the violence of some of his reactions) and a true mystic, Christophe had also received the double gift of friendship and poetry. Early in his monastic life in France, he enjoyed deep, mystical friendships that lasted after his departure to Algeria and Tibhirine. Such friendships prepared him to open his heart to a horizon that included the Muslim friend, a horizon that was already De Chergé’s. As the monk responsible for the garden, Brother Christophe’s daily work with the monastery’s associates blossomed as a mystical garden. Friendship was an epiphany of God in ordinary things. When he wrote about friendship—and he wrote a lot—his vision centered on Christ Jesus, the Friend par excellence, with whom Christophe felt so closely bound. One of his friends said that his love transformed him into the image of Christ, and therefore had to be fulfilled by the same kind of selfless gift of his life.

If De Chergé already inhabited a universal horizon of friendship, and was therefore at times hard to follow, Brother Christophe’s
gift reminds us how much the inner call to embrace everyone is anything but a synonym for indifference. Love always involves a preference, a choice. Friendship never dismisses the intensity of the particular on its way to the universal. Christophe interchanged the words brotherhood and friendship, probably because in French the verb “aimer” (to love) is so closely related to the noun “ami” (friend). “The friend is the brother reclaimed day after day. . . . In this way, friendship should be the core of a fraternal humanity.” The order of the first sentence can also be reversed: the brother (as monks call each other) reclaimed day after day becomes as close as a friend (someone chosen, unlike a brother). When Brother Christoph wrote, “There is someone between us. . . . It is He who is between the one and the other when they are friends,” he was speaking of his friendship with a monk from his previous community, but his words can also refer to the community of Tibhirine. For him, this “someone” is clearly Christ, the face of God, the face of his friendship. As a friend of Jesus, he felt commissioned to convey his love to everyone, adding, “To be a friend is a serious matter. It exceeds both of us. It makes us die. There is nothing left but the gift.”

At the end of their community life in dialogue, the monks of Tibhirine, so close to martyrdom (but also so reluctant to apply this word to themselves), had reached the point where the last encounter was anticipated as a grace of God, foreseen by Him whose gift would pass through them.28

The fatal gesture of the “friend of the last minute” was foreseen by De Chergé as something that would make them two happy thieves. But the gift of God is always greater: the Testament of De Chergé was fulfilled by friendship, the loving unto death of the whole community. Beyond the two happy thieves, they have become, like Abraham, “a benediction for all nations,” a sign of hope for the communion of religions that should bring peace to a world of violence. The gift of their lives has joined together the

28 Alluding to his priesthood, Christophe wrote, “The gift of Jesus passes through my hands.”
gift of Mohammad and the gift of Jesus in God and invites us to enter into the Greater Mystery, the mystery of friendship and love.

“Nothing is left but the gift.” This is precisely what makes the Testament of Tibhirine so alive today. Because the gift of friendship is eternal, because it is God’s gift, we are here invited to share it with one another.