

Henri Vergès,

Marist Brother



I must give thanks to the Father, with the Virgin Mary, for the inestimable gift of my spiritual journeying which owes so much to this sharing of life in «the house of Islam» (*Br. Henri*)

Rome, 20-5-1994

BROTHER HENRI VERGÈS

Biographical outline

He was born on 15th July 1930 in France in a village in the eastern Pyrenees called Matemale. Entered the juniorate in 1942, made his novitiate at Saint-Paul-Trois-Châteaux 1945-1946. After a year at the scholasticate at N.D. de l'Hermitage, he passed his *Brevet Élémentaire*. Assiduously pursuing his studies he obtained a degree in philosophy, learned Spanish and later Algerian Arabic. Until 1969 his apostolate was in the south of France: Aveyron, Ardèche, Gironde, Drôme et Corrèze - from 1958 to 1966, he was Master of Novices at N.D. de Lacabane. He was one of the capitulants at the XVth General Chapter in 1967-1968. In 1969 he went to Algeria where he was, successively, teacher, principal of the Marist College of St Bonaventure, teacher of mathematics, then of French in a state secondary school, animator of the library Ben Cheneb - Algiers. On Sunday 8th May some extremists burst into the library; they immediately murdered Brother Henri as well as Sister Paule-Hélène Saint-Raymond, an Assumption Sister. The G.I.A (*Groupe Islamiste Armé*) claimed responsibility for the murders.



(= Christ est ressuscité)

Note of the Archbishop of Algiers

Two religious: Brother Henri Vergès, a Marist Brother, and Sister Paule- Hélène Saint-Raymond, a Little Sister of the Assumption were victims, on 8 May, of a senseless crime whose import we do not understand.

Both of them were working in the working-class district of the Casbah and the Bab el Oued district of Algiers offering a service to the high-school pupils there. In spite of the serious tension in the country and the numerous assassinations in the town of Algiers during the last eighteen months, these religious had decided to remain at the service of young people and their families who had every confidence in them.

All of us are deeply affected by this double murder as are our many Algerian friends.

We are united with their families in their suffering, as we are with that of all the other victims of violence since the start of the Algerian crisis. But we do not wish this crime to be used in order to question the vocation of these two religious which is also that of the whole of our Church in Algeria.

We believe that today it is more than ever indispensable to multiply the places where Christians and Moslems work together and learn mutual recognition and esteem.

That is also our contribution to the Gospel of Peace.

Henri TEISSIER
Archbishop of Algiers

Some extracts from the messages of solidarity

* «A wonderful life 'at the frontier' and 'in the advance guard' brings honour to the religious life and all Marists can be proud to belong to his family. May the blood that has been spilled bring forth the shoots of Peace. And may the life and death of Henri Vergès remind us that the blood of Christ is not just something to be preached about but that it involves the gift of self.» (*Provincial of the Marist Fathers of France*)

* «*I had noticed, as he was telling me about the work he was doing in the Library, a real Passion: a Passion for friendly encounter, a Passion for the service of young folk, a Passion which bound him so strongly to this People! Such he was right to the end of this Passion. Henceforth his name and that of Sister Paule-Hélène will be linked with that of the dead and risen Christ.*» (*Person in charge of the National Service for the Pastoral Care of Migrants*)

* «Henri and Paule-Hélène were good people. With them the service of others, offered with intelligence, discretion, selflessness and scrupulous respect, was no longer a myth but a reality.» (*Person in charge of Caritas Internationalis*)

* «*He knew how to bear witness to the meaning of the Gospel by giving his life.*» (*The Bishop of Perpignan*)

* «The President of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Oran as well as the Administrative Council and the manufacturers of Western Villayas, dismayed at the murder of Br Henri Vergès and Sister Paule-Hélène Saint-Raymond, offer you and the Christian community of Algiers their sincere sympathy and beg you to believe in the shame we feel in the face of this horrible murder. Our sympathy towards the Christian community in Algeria and Christians in general is stronger than ever. We are praying with you for harmony and mutual love and beg you to believe, Monsignor, in the friendship and fraternity of your fellowmen, the Moslems of Oran.»

BROTHER VERGÈS IN THE MIDST OF ISLAM IN ALGERIA

A brother who asks me to share for the sake of the brothers. «What you have freely received, freely give» ... How could I refuse?

But also, how can one express a spiritual experience? One can only stammer. God alone knows the windings of the way, the path He intends for this one and for that one, the journeying marked out by our welcomes and our refusals.

Simple fraternal sharing can help someone or other live his own *personal* and *irreplaceable* calling in the here and now where God is leading him.

Conversion, a gift of the Spirit

Why have I journeyed so long, since the beginning of my religious life, in a state of mind which causes me to dream of other places - the «missions» in Latin America, in Madagascar, in ... but never in Algeria! to the detriment of God's gift to me at the present moment to live in such a place where He wants me and which I have tried to escape from? Perhaps I sought an excuse to dissociate myself from situations which were becoming so crucifying that I no longer knew how to discern the gift of God...

Until that day when, suddenly, everything became simple. What sense does it make to bind oneself in obedience, so as to place oneself *unconditionally* at God's disposal, and then seek surreptitiously to fulfil oneself in a place other than that willed by God? Sudden illumination: leave all the initiative to the Lord, trying, without anxiety, to discern His will in every circumstance and to commit myself with all the potential he has given me. To live totally God's gift to me here and now.



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An inrush of peace in this availability, which seizes one to the depth of one's being. Gift of the Spirit. Thanksgiving.

Call to Algeria

A few months pass, and I am asked to join our community in Algiers and to direct a diocesan school there. The humour of Providence which knows how to prepare the ground, and to await the appropriate moment. Waited to follow the lead of the Virgin at the Annunciation.



Now to mobilise all my resources for the success of the work entrusted to me. At my request I am given two years before actually taking over the direction of the school: to feel my way and to acquire a minimum knowledge of the language and the Arab-Moslem culture. An initiative which seems to me in line with the positive response given but without intending to impose it.

Simple evocations.

A few facts, a few situations to outline a spiritual journey... To what extent it has been really lived, God alone knows.

Arrival

Disembarked at the port of Algiers on 6th August ... Transfiguration. Police and customs checks ... interminably long queues ... two hours in an oven ... There remained currency checks: having nothing to declare I entered the free lane joining a long line leading to the currency office. One of the waiting Algerians, thinking that I was queue-hopping, protested loudly: «Another one who thinks he owns the place. We haven't finished being colonised yet!»

destiny. It was, all the same, a regret for me to see one of those places of freedom and of initiative disappear, to be merged into the system, into an ideology absorbing everything.

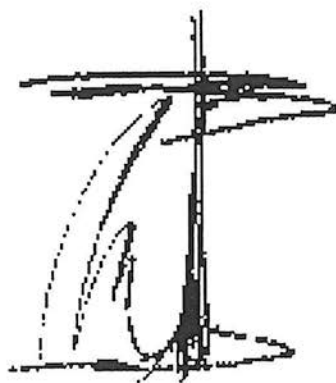
But satisfaction also at passing the baton to a team of parents and educators who knew how to carry on over the years a little of that spirit lived progressively together.

It was therefore in a spirit of celebration that we finished that scholastic year, giving thanks to God for this sharing lived over the years, placing ourselves once more in His hands for the future, the life and the encounters He had destined for us.

During the preceding years I had dreaded that such a decision by the Algerian authorities would mean the withdrawal pure and simple of our community. This was not the case: our Superiors, responding to the wishes of the Church in Algeria, were in favour of two of us applying for a work contract with the Algerian Ministry of Education.

And so it was that the two of us were sent together outside the capital to a small town in the High-Plains. We were no longer the deciders, the initiators: we were becoming modest participants in an enterprise managed by others with an annual contract the renewal of which became ever more reluctant as the years went by. And all this in an atmosphere increasingly Moslem and socialist.

A situation of poverty where we found ourselves on equal footing with a fairly primitive mountain people, firmly anchored in their culture and traditions. They welcomed us, but it was up to us to discover them, to adapt ourselves to their simple life while at the same time deepening within ourselves our Christianness.



At the beginning, a prudent distance on both sides, perfectly natural - the same thing with regard to ourselves and our pupils even though we might wish to be closer to them. With time we got used to each other, we gained their confidence. The doors did not

climbed the stairs of our apartment building, the small children even embraced us as we passed. Some believers of good will sensed something of the mystery abiding in us, and some others would like to have had us share their Moslem faith: it would be so much safer before the All Powerful God! Deep friendships were formed especially during the five years that I was living alone while awaiting a Brother to replace the one who had left me after two years of this presence. The sharing intensified and manifested itself in mutual respect, and sometimes in admiration of the Mystery of God present even in the diversity of our religions. His Spirit is there. It is He who, on occasions, makes our hearts beat in unison. This contact with the Islam of the ordinary people was a deepening for me, in the matter of prayer, in the absoluteness of God, in the welcome of a brother.

In 1980 the grace was offered to me to participate in the «Ribat», inaugurated the year before, «born of the initiative of Christians desiring a more spiritual approach to the Moslem tradition and to believers in Islam, not only in their biennial meetings but also in their daily life». The members of a Moslem fraternity even expressed the desire to join us and do not miss their weekly meeting with us, usually on Thursday afternoons. There are moments of intense communion when we are able to share in reflection and prayer what we are trying to live, each on his side, from day to day according to the theme we have been following for six months. The next: «Your will be done» ... the last having been: «Guide me in the truth».

Undoubtedly a privileged experience, but one which gives some idea of what could be the communion of believers of different faiths, seeking to obey in the depth of their being the promptings of the Spirit. According to the beautiful image of one of these Islamic brothers: in the desert when we arrive, at the same time but coming from various directions, dying of thirst at an oasis, we don't worry about knowing who everyone is: we quench our thirst together, in the joy of the spring of living water. Likewise those who thirst for God.

All this allows me to go to the heart of my own Marist ideal in a journeying, entirely Marial, made humbly in the company of Christ Jesus at work in the heart of the world, even if one does not understand it - attentive silence before the mystery of God in mankind - sometimes bursting forth in wonder like the Virgin of the Visitation. One feels drawn into the heart of one's own commitment and prompted to go ever further in one's personal and

community consecration.

Interior perspectives where I regain my bearings more fully as Christian and as Marist Brother. The present stage expressing itself in part by the kind of unease I feel when I use the adjective «tolerant»... fully aware of its negative content. To tolerate is «to put up with» the fact that the other is different, that he may not be the type that I consider to be the best... to welcome him in spite of his prejudices... Wouldn't the positive attitude be rather to try to discover the *gift of God* in my brother, that something, unique and irreplaceable, that God has rightly placed in him... in that contemplative attitude of the Virgin who «kept all these things and meditated on them in her heart».

New stage

For me the annual contract was renewed twelve times. But the thirteenth was refused. Determination on the part of the ministry concerned to further its Algerianisation programme. The year before, the Brother who had rejoined me had already been refused his fifth renewal.

We were once more, with the riches and the limits of our charism, at the disposal of the Lord who has no particular mountain or temple where he must be adored... And so we are living discreetly at the service of young people, in charge of a diocesan house of benevolence: social secretariat and library for the secondary school pupils of two working class districts of the capital, Bab-El-Oued and Casbah, more a participation in the chaplaincy of the African Christian students dispersed in the institutes and universities of the Algiers region. Still close to youth in the spirit of Champagnat, our founder, for whom «all the dioceses of the world were within our view»... The reality remains, in keeping with the needs of our time.

But not much assured of the present situation... Always ready to shift camp, confronted as we are with the social, political and religious vicissitudes of our country.

Conclusion

I must give thanks to the Father, with the Virgin Mary, for the inestimable gift of my spiritual journeying which owes so much to this sharing of life in «the house of Islam»:

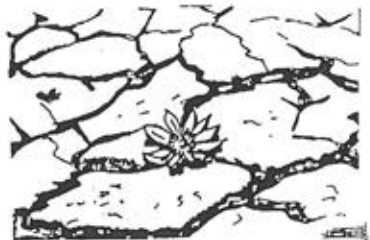
- in an ambience which challenges unceasingly - even if it is at times unreasonable - in *prayer*, in the gift of self (= islam) into the hands of God (who for us is Father...);
- in *poverty*, in particular in this disengagement as far as «structures» are concerned, from various forms of security, which makes us more available to the breathings of the Spirit;
- in consecrated *chastity* for the most part incomprehensible to our Moslem brothers, but which leaves a mystery to probe, demanding for us and challenging for them;
- in *obedience* «My food is to do the will of Him who sent me»... Humble presence certainly willed by God, as important for Christianity as for Islam. An attitude continually challenging us to situate ourselves in the truth with regard to God and our brothers, mankind.
- in a brotherly and welcoming *community*, a communion which gains enrichment from the values of sharing and hospitality of Islam;

All that lived from day to day in humility, like the Virgin Mary, advancing in faith like Abraham, the father of believers, not knowing where God was leading him but going on in complete faith and confidence.

A sharing concretised more officially, in agreement with my brothers, by my request for Algerian citizenship made six years ago: to make myself, as far as possible, less foreign, in the larger community of destiny.

In short, it is my Marist commitment which allows me, in spite of my limitations, to merge harmoniously in the Moslem milieu, and my life in this milieu, in its turn, fulfils me more deeply as a Marist Christian. God be praised !

(Emili Turú, Rev. Vida Religiosa, 1990)



LAST MESSAGE OF BR HENRI

Thoughts written by Br Henri at the Trappist Abbey of Tibhirine, the place where he used to hold meetings with «Ribat», a group which dedicated itself to prayer, reflection and Islam-Christian communication.

In our day to day relations, let us quite positively take the side of love, forgiveness, communion against hatred, revenge and violence.

In line with the spirit of «Ribat», let us be solicitous about promoting these groups, simple though they may be, of prayer and intercommunication among people of good will.



Let us feel near to those who, though born in Islam, wish to take part in our Baptismal commitments. May their way and ours be a spur to each of us.

These three ideas, which no doubt can be elaborated and expressed more stylistically, should, I think, be in our minds constantly.

*Br Henri Vergès,
4 February 1994*

AVE MARIA

اَسْلَامٌ عَلَيْكَ يَا مَرْيَمُ
يَا مُمْتَلِئَةً نِعَمَةً

★ الرَّبِّ مَعَكَ ★

مُبَارَكَةٌ أَنْتِ فِي النِّسَاءِ
وَ مُبَارَكَةٌ ثَمَرَةٌ بَطْنِكَ

★ يَسُوعُ ★

يَا مَرْيَمُ الْقَدِيسَةُ

★ يَا وَلَدَةَ آلِهِ ★

كَلِّ لِحَبْلِنَا نَحْنُ الْخَطَاةَ

الْآنَ وَ فِي سَاعَةِ مَوْتِنَا

أَمِينَ