The Legacy of Pierre Claverie

Jean-Jacques Pérennès, O.P.

Pierre Claverie (1938–96), bishop of Oran (1981–96), Algeria, was one of nineteen Catholic religious figures killed in Algeria during the period of violence in that country in the 1990s. At his funeral many Algerian Muslim friends lamented the loss of “their bishop,” not because he had tried to convert them to Christianity, but because he had been able to create strong ties between two communities, Christian and Muslim, that history had profoundly divided. Born in colonial Algeria, Claverie tried throughout his life to be a bridge between these two communities, to be a man of both shores of the Mediterranean, not merely because this happened to be the circumstance of his own life, but because he was convinced that the place of the church is precisely on what he called “lines of fracture”: “The Church fulfills its calling and its mission when it is present at the breaking points that crucify humanity in its flesh and in its unity. In Algeria we are on one of the seismic faults which cut through the world: Islam-West, North-South, rich-poor, etc., and we are where we should be because it is only here that the light of the Resurrection can be perceived and, with it, hope for a renewal of our world.” A decade after his death, his message is one of striking relevance.

A Life Dedicated to Meeting the Other

Claverie was born in Algiers in 1938 when Algeria was French. His family were pieds-noirs (lit. “black feet”), Europeans in Algeria, living in what had been a French colony since 1830. At the time of his birth, his family had been there for four generations, which explains why he always thought of Algeria as “his” country. Like most people in his social sphere, however, he lived until the age of twenty without meaningful contact with the Arabic and Muslim world next to his own. Later in life he described this situation as follows: “I lived my childhood in Algiers in a working-class neighborhood of that cosmopolitan Mediterranean city. In contrast to other Europeans born in the countryside or in small towns, I never had Arabic friends—not at the local elementary school, where there were no Arabs, nor at my high school, where there were only a few, and where the Algerian war of independence was beginning to create an explosive environment. We were not racists, merely indifferent, ignoring the majority of the people in this country. They were a part of the landscape of our outings, the background of our meetings and our lives. They never were equal partners.”

Jean-Jacques Pérennès, O.P., is a French Dominican friar. After studies in philosophy, theology, and economics, he spent a significant part of his life in Arabic countries. He lived for ten years in Algeria with Bishop Claverie and is now Secretary General of the Dominican Institute for Oriental Studies (IDEO) in Cairo. He is currently coordinator of the Dominicans in the Arab countries, especially Iraq, which he visits regularly.
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Of the ten million inhabitants of Algeria at that time, Muslims represented 90 percent of the population. Pierre’s parents were honorable people, not colons (exploitative landowners), but they lived in what Pierre would later call “the colonial bubble.” Born in a Christian family, he acknowledged: “I must have heard many sermons about loving our neighbors because I was . . . a Christian and even a boy scout, but I never realized that the Arabs were also my neighbors. Although some people were able to do so, I did not leave that bubble to go to learn about that different world that was always beside me but that I didn’t understand. There had to be a war for the bubble to burst.”

His discovery of the other occurred as Pierre progressed on a rather painful spiritual journey that took him to the Dominican order. After beginning his religious life as a novice in Lille in 1958, he spent most of the next eight years at the monastery of Le Saulchoir near Paris, where his horizons expanded considerably. This center of learning was brimming over with remarkable figures and was visited by a succession of men who opened new perspectives to him. Very early, he wanted to go to Algeria, and so he started learning Arabic and acquired some basic knowledge of Islam. Pierre’s mother and sister left Algeria just before the country gained its independence in July 1962, but his father stayed until February 1963, when he reached retirement. Pierre himself returned to Algiers in 1962 and 1963 to complete his military service by working with army chaplains and running a Catholic club for enlisted men. This experience in an independent Algeria encouraged Pierre even more to return, which he did after his ordination as a priest in July 1967. His priority was to learn about the culture of this country, and three years of intensive studies gave him a good mastery of Arabic. A precious network of friends taught him the rest, those things that are beyond words and that are learned only by sharing with others one’s life, with its joys, its struggles, and its pains. Pierre later paid vibrant homage to his Algerian friends in the cathedral of Algiers on the day of his ordination as bishop in October 1981: “My Algerian brothers and friends, I owe to you also what I am today. You also have welcomed and supported me with your friendship. Thanks to you, I have discovered Algeria, where, even though it was my country, I lived as a stranger throughout my youth. With you, in learning Arabic, I learned above all to speak and understand the language of the heart, the language of brotherly friendship, where races and religions commune with each other. And again, I have the softness of heart to believe that this friendship will hold up against time, distance, and separation. For I believe that this friendship comes from God and leads to God.”

At this point, Claverie had permanently settled in “his” country, but the bedazzlement of his rediscovery was replaced by the difficult demands of dealing with real differences. Engaged in a process of decolonization, Algeria eagerly reclaimed its identity and its culture, with Islam as one of the essential constituents; Christians in Algeria are sometimes reminded of their status as “guests in the House of Islam.” When he became a bishop, Claverie applied for Algerian citizenship to emphasize the enduring ties that bound him henceforth to this country, but he never received it. “In the Muslim world it is not nationality that confers belonging, but religion,” he wrote at the time, adding with a little sadness: “It is true that the longer I live in Algeria, the more I realize, in spite of the strength and quality of my Algerian ties, that I remain a stranger here.” To serve as a bridge is never comfortable.

The Challenge of Otherness

Meeting the other is a challenge, especially if we are not satisfied with understanding the other simply in our own terms. When he arrived in Algeria in 1967, Claverie found a country very different from the one of his childhood: most of the foreigners were gone, and the country had thrown itself with enthusiasm into a campaign of economic and social development of a socialist nature under the direction of President Boumedienne. In 1973 Cardinal Duval, archbishop of Algiers, entrusted Claverie with the direction of Les Glycines, the academic and research center of the Diocese of Algiers, with an emphasis upon Islamic and Arabic studies. Here members of the religious community studied alongside young Christians who came in a spirit of cooperation to aid in the development of Algeria. They were preparing themselves for a mission that reached well outside the Christian community.

This was the period after Vatican II, which considerably reshaped the church’s approach to missionary work. The council’s Declaration on Religious Liberty, Dignitatis humanae, solemnly proclaims the obligation to respect the freedom of conscience of each individual. Nostra actate, the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, goes further by declaring that “the Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men” (sec. 2). Although it adds that the church must proclaim Christ, “the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), “in whom God reconciled all things to himself” and in whom “men find the fullness of their religious life,” the council nonetheless opened new perspectives for interreligious dialogue.

In 1964 the creation of the Secretariat for Non-Christians (whose name was changed in 1988 to the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue) led to the organization of large Islamic-Christian conferences in Córdoba in 1974, in Tripoli in 1976, and again in Córdoba in 1977. These conferences were interesting, but they soon revealed that even with the best of good will, these religions did not share a common language or the same understanding of terms as essential as “revelation” or “prophet.” As a result, at this time Claverie became convinced that this approach was not the best way to enhance the truthful nature of the dialogue. He never attended these large gatherings, preferring daily work side by side with Muslims. Six years after his ordination as bishop, he became in 1987 a member of the Secretariat for Non-Christians. This position gave him the chance to temper the enthusiasm of some of those specializing in “dialogue”: “In order to have a dialogue and not the superimposing of one monologue over another, in other words a ‘dialogue of the deaf,’ everything must begin on each side with a question. If we only have affirmations to share, then we can only move beyond an exchange of information to enter into an argument. . . . Rather than ramming
our truths down each other’s throats, isn’t it better to listen to each other and to listen together to the questions raised by the developments of our world?”

One of the original contributions of Claverie in this field is that he took the difference of others seriously. It is always tempting to reduce the other to a simpler dimension in order to meet him or her more easily, or to stick to a small common denominator that avoids the shock of differences. For Claverie, the dialogue must always “start with a face-to-face meeting,” which is sometimes a difficult experience: “It is not possible to cross out with a single pen stroke, or to drown in pious moral exhortations, historical conflicts or differences that separate us and sometimes oppose us to each other in what we hold as most essential, that is to say, our faith in God and our conception of Man.”

We must respect others with all their differences, acknowledge them as free and responsible beings, and care about them, as Emmanuel Lévinas used to say. This desire for genuine encounters was the passion of Claverie’s life. He wrote in 1994, when the price to pay was beginning to become a heavy one: “At this moment, the key word of my faith is ‘dialogue,’ not because this is a strategic choice linked to my situation, but because I feel that dialogue constitutes the relation of God with people and of people with each other. . . . May the other, may all others, be the passion and the wound through which God will be able to break into our fortresses of self-satisfaction to give birth to a new and fraternal humanity.”

This idea is developed more fully in a posthumous work by Claverie called *Petit traité de la rencontre et du dialogue*.

The Healing of Memory

If the meeting between Christians and Muslims is so difficult, it is because our memories have been wounded. They are overloaded by images, recollections, even phantasms from the past that come in the way of a calm and peaceful encounter. Speaking to a Muslim audience at the Grand Mosque of Paris in June 1988, Claverie declared at the very beginning: “In the totality of the relations and exchanges which have marked the meeting between Christians and Muslims, dialogue has not always been the rule, far from it. In fact, since the beginning, controversies and conflicts have dominated the relationship, even if friendly ties, commercial exchanges or theological debates showed a desire to communicate.”

He continued, reminding his audience: “The collective unconscious has kept the scars that we have inflicted on each other, and it would be totally self-deceiving to believe that we could easily get rid of them by appealing to good feelings. At any moment, and especially during times of crisis, the warriors of Allah and the Saracens or the Moors invading Europe reappear in the collective mind and the discourse of the West, while the Muslim always recalls the Crusades and colonialism.”

Instead of giving in to a soft and easy form of ecumenism, Claverie preferred a speech rooted in truth. To speak truly, one must first make a painstaking and courageous analysis of the past, a loaded past when it deals with the relations between Islam and the West. In the Middle East the Crusades remain a major source of trauma kept alive by the colonial adventures of the nineteenth century; these two historical realities often bring the Muslim world to identify Christianity with domination. Contemporary forms of Western imperialism have reactivated this identification, as was obvious during the Gulf War, when the evocation of the Crusades and the Saracens reappeared in the collective realms of fancy. It is especially easy to make this kind of connection because it is so often constructed from clichés and prejudices that are difficult to remove from the collective unconscious, which is irrational by definition.

Thus in the eyes of Claverie there is no possible meeting with the other without a clear-eyed look into the past and without the healing of memory. At times he would speak of “the abyss that separates us,” even though his basic disposition pushed him to stress the common bonds that pull us closer to each other. In his eyes, one of the ways to heal memory was to live and work together by creating occasions and the space necessary to meet and collaborate. This is what the church in Algeria has done since Algeria gained its independence. The church defines itself as a “church that brings people together.” Because there are only several thousand Christians, mostly foreigners, in Algeria, the church primarily understands the significance of its presence there in terms of its relationship with Muslims. After the shock of independence it was Cardinal Duval who helped the church to redefine the meaning of its mission in a Muslim Algeria.

He liked to say that in this meeting the Christian tries not so much to convert Muslims as to bear voluntary witness to a brotherly love. Living and working together with Muslims led the church of Algeria to commit itself to a variety of activities such as education of women, receiving and helping the handicapped, and giving academic help to disadvantaged children. Claverie was thrilled every time he could open one of these “platforms for social interaction and service,” as he used to call them, in his diocese. Even during the upheaval of the 1990s, he renovated old buildings of the church to establish such platforms in Tlemcen, Sidi bel Abbès, Mascara, and other towns in the region of Oran, his diocese, where today the small Christian community is immersed in the Muslim world, offering a free and voluntary demonstration of love and service.

But he also knew that healing the wounded memory required a price, and he would stress it with more and more intensity as violence spread in Algerian society. “Living in the Muslim world, I know the weight of this temptation to withdraw into oneself, the difficulty of mutual understanding and of respecting each other. And I can measure perfectly the abyss that separates us. . . . We would not be able to bridge this gap by ourselves. But God, in Jesus, gives us the means to measure the length, the breadth, the depth, and the extent of His Love. Supported by this revelation, we can regain confidence. . . . To give one’s life for this reconciliation as Jesus gave his life to knock down the wall of hatred that separated Jews, Greeks, pagans, slaves, and free men, isn’t that a good way to honor his sacrifice?”

At the height of the Islamist violence in 1995, Claverie reread Bonhoeffer, whose texts took on a new meaning for him. He explains this insight in a text from October 1995:

In the struggle that the Gospel is waging today to bring the kingdom of God, he [Bonhoeffer] assumes an exceptional position, and his message reaches me today like a call of solidarity in our turbulent times. We are not the first to face violence and death with our bare hands and only the force of our convictions. We are not the only
ones either. At the moments when we could be tempted to give up, to run away, or to retreat within our fears, how can we not hear the voices of those who held up against death their own lives and offered to bear witness to their faith in the omnipotence of love, of life? . . . Here and today, in Algeria now, we have no other place to accomplish what God expects of us, who are believers, and what we believe to be our highest truth: to live, by the Spirit of Jesus, in a filial relation with God the Father, and a relation open to universal brotherhood . . . Then begins the one-on-one battle with reality, in all its resistance, its opacity, its rough edges, and, finally, death. Our faith does not pull us away from all this. On the contrary, it immerses us into it, with Jesus. Our life takes its meaning and its fruitfulness through following Jesus on the roads of the world: “The proper place for the life of Christians is not the solitude of the cloister, but the very camp of the enemy,” wrote Bonhoeffer. If the cloister exists, it is not for its solitude but for a deeper relationship with Jesus and—through him, with him, and in him—with God the Father and with the world. 11

Claverie ends with words of Bonhoeffer that heralded his own destiny: “In fact, our battle involves a grace for which we must pay. Grace acquired cheaply is grace without the cross. Grace for which we must pay is the Gospel, which one must always look for anew. This grace is costly because it can be acquired only at the price of one’s own life.” 12 From then on, he stressed more and more often the importance for a Christian to be on the “lines of fracture” that cut through the world. In his eyes it is the place where the paschal experience of the victory of life over death can be lived.

A Renewed Look at the Mission

Pierre Claverie left us some innovative thoughts on the mission. As a bishop, he was called upon to give his reactions to the text that the Vatican published in 1984 under the title Dialogue and Proclamation. The drafting was difficult because it brought together two rather different sensibilities: on the one hand, that of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, whose mission is to be open to the contributions of other religions, and, on the other hand, that of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples (formerly the Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith), with a more traditional vision of the mission, which aims at formal conversion to Christ. As soon as he started in his position as bishop of Oran, Claverie made the originality of his approach felt:

Yes, our church is sent on a mission. I am not afraid of saying it and of expressing my joy upon entering this mission with you. Many misunderstandings inherited from the past hang over the mission and missionaries. Let us say clearly today: we are not and we do not want to be the agents of an economic or cultural neocolonialism that divides the Algerian people to better control them. . . . We are not and do not want to be evangelical proselytizers who think they honor God’s love by a tactless zeal and a total lack of respect for the other, for his culture, for his faith. . . . But we are and we want to be missionaries of the
This conception leads to a certain style of Christian presence, namely, poor and brotherly:

How can we listen if we are full of ourselves, of our material or intellectual riches? . . . Our good fortune in Algeria is to be stripped for the most part—but are we ever stripped enough?—of our riches, our pretensions, and our self-satisfaction to be able to hear, to welcome, to share the little that we have. We should not always be worried about defending ourselves. What do we have to defend? Our fortunes? Our buildings? Our influence? Our reputation? Our social space? All of this would certainly be ridiculous in the light of the Gospel of the Beatitudes. . . . Let us thank God when he returns his church to a simple humanity. . . . Let us rejoice in everything that makes us friendly and available, more concerned about giving than defending ourselves. . . . Rather than protecting ourselves, we should defend what we deem essential to life, to growth, to dignity, and to the future of humanity. The love of God pushes us to do it. 13

This great concern to show respect for the other’s religious journey did not prevent him, in the end, from being attentive to the rare individuals who turned toward Christianity when Algeria was caught up in its spiral of violence.

One of Claverie’s last texts, an essay entitled “Humanité plurielle,” may be the most powerful in terms of the theology of the mission. It invites us to open ourselves to the truth of others, but without falling into syncretism or relativism. Commenting on the crisis facing the Algerian society at that time, he wrote:

In this experience shaped by closure [of the colonial period], then by the current crisis and the emergence of the individual [who must decide how to deal with it], I have acquired the personal conviction that humanity exists only if it is composed of diverse elements and that, as soon as we claim—and in the Catholic Church we have had this sad experience during our history—to possess the truth or to speak in the name of humanity, we fall into totalitarianism and exclusion. No single person possesses the truth. Everyone is looking for it. There are certainly objective truths, but they are beyond all of us, and one can reach them only through a long journey and by slowly recomposing that truth by collecting from other cultures, from other types of humanity, what others have also gained, have searched for in their own journey toward truth. I am a believer. I believe in one God, but I don’t claim to possess that God, either through Jesus who reveals him to me, or through the tenets of my faith. One does not possess God. One does not possess the truth, and I need the truth of others. This is the experience that I am having now with thousands of Algerians in the sharing of an existence and the questions that we all ask ourselves. . . . If only, in the Algerian crisis, after this passage
through violence and the deep fractures of society, and also of religion and of personal identity, one could eventually imagine that the other has the right to exist, that he carries a truth, and that he is worthy of respect, then the dangers to which we are exposed will not have been run in vain.\textsuperscript{14}

**Conclusion**

Pierre Claverie was assassinated on August 1, 1996, killed at the same time as a young Algerian, Mohamed, who was helping him during the summer. This death, with their blood mixed at the door of his chapel, is like the seal on a life totally given to building bridges between the two shores of the Mediterranean, and also between the West and the Muslim world. The luminous testimony of his life and the force of his words make him an inspiring witness for our time. In 2002 his portrait was solemnly carried in a procession during the annual homage rendered in Rome to the memory of Oscar Romero, the Salvadoran archbishop gunned down in 1980.

**Notes**

2. Ibid., p. 31.
3. Ibid., p. 32.
4. Ibid., p. 108.
12. Ibid., p. 212.

**Selected Bibliography**

**Works by Pierre Claverie**


**Works About Pierre Claverie**