

## **Beatification of Algerian martyrs concerns all who seek a pluralist country**

*Dialogue in truth presupposes looking at the differences with the other and grasping them as an opportunity*

Anne-Bénédicte Hoffner, *La Croix International*, 6 February 2018



*Bishop Pierre Claverie of Oran, who was assassinated in 1996 (Photo by AFP)*

**Dominican Father Jean-Jacques Pérènnès** lived in Algeria for eight years. Following his departure, he stayed in close contact with the late Bishop Pierre Claverie of Oran, who was assassinated in 1996.

In 2000, Father Pérènnès published a biography, *Pierre Claverie: Un Algérien par alliance* (Cerf, 2000). He now directs the Ecole Biblique (Biblical School) in Jerusalem.

Moreover, he has followed the whole process of beatification for Bishop Claverie and the other Algerian religious martyrs.

Anne-Bénédicte Hoffner for *La Croix* interviewed Father Pérènnès. Following is the interview:

**La Croix: In your view, why is this beatification of the 19 religious assassinated in Algeria between 1994 and 1996 so important?**

**Father Jean-Jacques Pérennès:** At its deepest level, this beatification is about friendship with Algeria and Algerians, which also includes facing troubles.

The aim of the beatification is to emphasize the deep friendship that has united and still unites Christians and Muslims in Algeria.

One could say that the beatification (of the martyrs) in a sense validates the meaning of a Christian presence in the Muslim world, not with the objective of proselytizing but in view of promoting an encounter with the other.

The person who best manifests this deep meaning is Mohamed Bouchikhi, the young Algerian, who was killed with Bishop Pierre Claverie on Aug. 1, 1996.

He stayed with (Bishop Claverie) even though he understood the risks he was running by remaining in contact with him, particularly after the deaths of the Tibhirine monks several weeks earlier.

There is no issue here of “co-optation.” Bouchikhi was and remains a Muslim. However, he is also linked to us in our hearts during this celebration.

Indeed, we felt this very clearly in September 2015 when the *positio* (paper in favor of the beatifications) was lodged and accepted by the Congregation for the Causes of Saints.

The families of the nineteen religious gathered in Lyon and Bishop Jean-Paul Vesco of Oran brought Mohamed's mother, brother and sister with him.

We understood then that we were also praying for a twentieth martyr in a kind of mysterious communion of men and women of different culture and religion.

**What can these witnesses tell us now more than twenty years after their deaths and in a totally different context?**

They invite us to go beyond clichés about Islam and to go beyond our fear of the other.

One of Bishop Pierre Claverie's most original and most useful contributions for today resides in his approach to interreligious dialogue.

Actually, he did not like the term. Moreover, he rarely took part in major conferences on the issue even though he was a member of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.

He was convinced that we do "not have enough words" for dialogue.

"As long as we have not measured the length, breadth, height and depth of the whole abyss that separates us, we will not be ready to recognize each other, to know each other, to love each other," he wrote.

In his view, a dialogue in truth presupposes looking at the differences with the other and grasping them as an opportunity.

His most beautiful pages, perhaps, are those that he based on his experience of otherness.

The post-Vatican II euphoria about interreligious dialogue has been swept away by political Islam and also by a certain turning inwards by western society, including by Christians.

So, we need to rediscover the meaning of an encounter with Muslims, without being carried away by romanticism, but in assisting each other on our respective paths.

The objective is not to develop an easy unanimity but to confront common challenges together.

Moreover, it is undoubtedly a pity that the non-religious press has limited itself to a relatively marginal aspect (of the beatification process), namely the inquiry into the circumstances of the deaths of the Tibhirine monks. This is to miss the deep meaning of the event.

**Is it possible and desirable in your view to celebrate these beatifications in Algeria?**

If the meaning of the event is to celebrate the friendship and faithfulness of these 19 martyrs with the Algerian people, then it seems not out of place to do so in Algeria.

The initial reactions there seem to indicate that the message has been understood and I am very pleased.

Evidently, however, we should not give the impression that the Christian victims count for more than Muslim victims, who were much more numerous.

In this regard, I find it highly relevant to mention the memory of the 99 imams who were killed for having refused to endorse violent extremism.

This illustrates that the beatification is not just a matter for Christians but for all those who wanted and still want a pluralistic Algeria, which refuses the kind of ideological enclosure into which the country was falling.

I recall that during Pierre Claverie's consecration as bishop in 1981, several hundred Christians and a few dozen Muslims were present in the Oran cathedral.

Fifteen years later at his funeral, it was the reverse.

Many Christians had left during the dark period. However, he won over a crowd of Muslim friends, who regarded him not only as "bishop of the Catholics" but also as their own bishop!