

The Terrible and Sublime Liturgy: Sustaining Mission to the Suffering in Beauvois' Of Gods and Men

by Anne M. Windholz

But as for me, I know that my Vindicator lives
and that he will at last stand forth upon the dust;
Whom I myself shall see:
my own eyes, not another's, shall behold him.
And from my flesh I shall see God;
my inmost being is consumed with longing.

Job 19: 23-27
From *Pastoral Care of the Dying*¹

The violence is killing me and I ought to find somewhere
some support not to let myself be carried away by this flood of death.

Fr. Christophe LeBreton,
Our Lady of Atlas Monastery, July 11, 1995²

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Those who dedicate their lives to serving the sick and the dying are well aware of the emotional and spiritual demands such work places upon them. According to Bruce Morrill, faced with inevitable mortality, many doctors disengage. They are trapped within “a highly pressured medical industry whose frontline care providers experience high rates of alcoholism, divorce, and suicide.”³ “Fear,” he contends, “is the problematic emotion here, not only fear in the immediate situation, such as failure in one’s task ... or personally failing the patient, but also fear ultimately of death itself.”⁴ This fear of death—another’s death and one’s own—is tangled in myriad tensions for physicians, nurses, and caregivers of the sick as well as the dying: societal stresses, unresolved grief, inability to find meaning in

¹ Quoted in Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy, *Pastoral Care of the Dying* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2002), 13.

² Quoted in Armand Veilleux, “The Witness of the Tiberine Martyrs,” *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 1, no.2 (2001). Reprinted on website of *Abbaye de Scourmont*, <http://www.scourmont.be/Armand/writings/martyrs-eng.htm>.

³ Bruce T. Morrill, *Divine Worship and Human Healing: Liturgical Theology at the Margins of Life and Death* (Collegetown, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 193.

⁴ Morrill, *Divine Worship*, 193-94.

suffering, and a tendency to divorce their own faith commitment (if they are people of religion) from their work. The result is a lost chance to access a well of spiritual resources that, while not always answering all questions, can nonetheless provide a foundation upon which to form a mature response to suffering. Within the Catholic Christian tradition, catechesis that foregrounds our roles as disciples of Christ, members of Christ's church, and practitioners of the rites and sacraments that shape and undergird our faith can remind those who minister to the sick (not just healthcare providers but also social workers and ministers) that they have a source of sustenance capable of comforting them and renewing their sense of mission as they struggle with the very human realities of injustice, cruelty, and loss.

Toward this end, I will present the catechetical possibilities offered by Xavier Beauvois' award-winning film *Of Gods and Men*.⁵ The film, by virtue of its setting in war-torn 1990s Algeria, necessarily introduces viewers to the challenges of interreligious dialogue and service within a context of violence, brutality, and religious extremism. In a post-9/11 world, this is a fraught topic, likely to raise strong emotions (not all of them good) among Americans even a decade later. And yet the film consistently demands of its viewers (even as real-life circumstance demanded of the Cistercians who lived and were kidnapped from the monastery at Tibhirine) a more nuanced view of humans' relations with their God (Muslim or Christian) and their neighbor. Further, it represents the lives of the Cistercian monks as integrating spirituality, liturgy, and mission in a way that upholds the integrity of both mission and minister in a most extreme situation. Ministry to the sick is a powerful motif running through the film's narrative: the monks' ministry in their healthcare clinic; their ministry to each other as they themselves face disease, physical infirmity, old age, and (increasingly, as the situation around them gets more tense) mental anguish; and their ministry to the war's victims as well as to the wounds of those who are apparent enemies. In the face of inevitable persecution and likely martyrdom, perseverance in their vows of stability, poverty, obedience and (not least) the call to love their neighbor demands that the monks draw sustenance from their communal prayer and liturgy; from the spirituality that ties them to the land and people they serve as well as to their God; and from the mission they embody: Christ's healing work among the poor and marginalized. The extent to which they succeed—and the extent to which we, as healers and ministers watching their story, feel strengthened for our own work by the catharsis and hope their tragedy inspires—has something to teach us about how liturgy, spirituality, and mission can intersect and be truly integrated. This integration is not achieved without great cost—sometimes, indeed, the cost of crucifixion—but in a way that brings healing in spite of sickness and resurrection in spite of death. At the site of this intersection we witness—and are ultimately, ourselves, called to celebrate ourselves—what Karl Rahner calls the “terrible and sublime liturgy” of the world.⁶ In that liturgy, we find the real school of Christian discipleship.⁷

***Fitna*: The Violent Context of 1990s Algeria**

Perhaps because I ignored the Other or because I denied his existence,
one day he suddenly leapt right in front of me.
He burst open my sheltered universe, which was ravaged by violence...
and asserted his existence.

Bishop Pierre Claverie of Oran⁸

⁵ *Of Gods and Men*, dir. Xavier Beauvois, with English subtitles (Paris: Armada/Why Not Productions, 2010), DVD.

⁶ Karl Rahner, “Secular Life and the Sacraments: A Copernican Revolution,” *Tablet* 226 (1971): 267.

⁷ David Lonsdale, “The Church as Context for Christian Spirituality,” *Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, ed. Arthur Holder (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 244.

⁸ Quoted in Philip C. Naylor, “Bishop Pierre Claverie and the Risks of Religious Reconciliation,” *The Catholic Historical Review* 96, no. 4 (2010): 729.

During the 1990s, the “black decade” during which seven Cistercian monks were martyred, over 100,000 Algerians were killed in civil unrest and guerilla warfare.⁹ Historian Philip Naylor labels this violence *fitna*, a word suggesting trial, intra-Muslim discord, and even chaos, because “insurgency in Algeria has involved many sides.”¹⁰ When Islamic militants won preliminary elections in 1992, the government suspended the electoral process. Violence erupted. Muslim extremists (associated with an organization known as GIA, or Armed Islamic Group) responded by ordering all foreigners, including Christian religious, out of the country, backing their demands with a campaign of terror against civilians.¹¹ While the fighting was primarily internecine, Naylor insists that it was “much more complicated than explanations citing conflict between the governments and insurgents or ‘secularists’ and Islamists” suggest.¹² Foreigners tended to be caught in the middle. Sixteen years after the 1996 kidnapping and execution of seven Tibhirine monks, it remains unclear who exactly was responsible for their deaths. Some have argued that the GIA was responsible; others believe that a government helicopter shot the monks and then tried to make it look as though GIA had done it by decapitating the corpses and hiding the rest of their bodies.¹³

What must be made clear to anyone seeing the film *Of Gods and Men*, and especially to Catholics seeking its spiritual wisdom in a catechetical context, is this: among the many Christians terrorized and killed, the monks of Tibhirine, like Bishop of Oran Pierre Claverie, did not consider Algerian Muslims their enemies. All these churchmen worked tirelessly for respectful dialogue in the tradition of Vatican II’s *Nostra Aetate*. We misconstrue their sense of mission and discipleship if we caricature all Muslims—including those involved in perpetrating violence—as nefarious and godless villains. God mattered to all the people involved. Therein resides the root of inexplicable violence as well as restorative compassion. Brother Luc, the doctor at Our Lady of Atlas in Tibhirine, ruefully quotes Pascal, “Men never do evil so cheerfully or completely as when they do it from religious conviction.”¹⁴ Bishop Claverie himself, who served as a member of the Papal Commission on Interreligious Dialogue, confessed, “For me ... God has many names,” insisting that “[e]ach religion carries in it the seeds of possible totalitarianism.”¹⁵ He refused to condemn, recognizing too well the damage inflicted by European colonialism (and the Church’s complicity in it) and also believing that all are brothers and sisters under God. “To reject the other ... is to condemn oneself,” he maintained.¹⁶ Radical love of neighbors informed the spirituality and the mission of these Christians. That they died for it—Bishop Claverie was assassinated along with his Muslim chauffeur only a few months after the deaths of the seven Tibhirine monks¹⁷—would not, from their perspective, invalidate their viewpoint. “The brutal death of one of us or all of us,” the Tibhirine monks wrote only a few months before their kidnapping, “would only be a consequence of this choice of life following Christ.”¹⁸ Christian de Chergé, Prior of the monastery and an avid student of Arabic and of Islam,¹⁹ expressed his solidarity with any victim of violence, whether Christian or Muslim. Anticipating the loss of his own life, he wished to “tie” his death “to so many equally violent deaths, which were

⁹ “Algeria’s Export of Terror,” *BBC News Africa*, February 26, 2003, <http://new.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/2802839.stm>.

¹⁰ Naylor, “Bishop Pierre Claverie,” 720, f.1.

¹¹ See “Algeria’s Export of Terror.” The repudiation of foreigners was traceable to residual anti-colonialist sentiment: Naylor, in *France and Algeria: A History of Decolonization and Transformation* (Gainesville: University of Florida, 2000), 231, notes that “Catholic orders collectively symbolized the ‘colonizing mission’ of France” and that the GIA assaults were correspondingly intentional and targeted.

¹² Naylor, “Bishop Pierre Claverie,” 720, f.1.

¹³ Naylor, “Bishop Pierre Claverie,” 739.

¹⁴ *Of Gods and Men*.

¹⁵ Quoted in Naylor, “Bishop Pierre Claverie,” 740.

¹⁶ Quoted in Naylor, “Bishop Pierre Claverie,” 740.

¹⁷ Veilleux, “The Witness of the Tibhirine Martyrs.”

¹⁸ Quoted by Veilleux, “The Witness of the Tibhirine Martyrs.”

¹⁹ Christian actively promoted interreligious dialogue with the monks’ Muslim neighbors, sharing prayers and “religious experience” at the monastery in “a group called Ribât el Salam” (see Veilleux, “The Witness of the Tibhirine Martyrs”).

anonymous and therefore did not affect people. My life has no higher price than any other, [sic] it has no lower price either.”²⁰

Mission to the People

“... the church exists primarily to proclaim the Kingdom to the whole world, rather than to make the whole world coextensive with the Church.”

Anthony Gittins²¹

Perhaps it is not enough to say that we have not to choose
between the [political] power and the terrorists.
In fact, every day and in concrete ways
we choose those whom Jean-Pierre calls “the common people.”
We cannot remain if we cut ourselves off from them.

Fr. Christophe LeBreton
Our Lady of Atlas, Tibhirine²²

The danger of focusing on the martyrdom and grisly end of the seven kidnapped Tibhirine monks is that (much as happened with Mel Gibson’s *Passion of the Christ*) we lose sight of the life and mission of the men who died. The seeming simplicity and beauty of that original mission and witness is represented in the bucolic, picturesque opening sequences of Beauvois’ film. We see the monks getting up in the night for prayer (*Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will proclaim your praise*) and later, in daylight, quietly at study in the library. We see Fr. Christophe watering the garden by hand, two other brothers labeling honey for sale in the local bazaar, a third brother helping an Islamic woman apply (apparently) for a visa to visit her son in Europe, and Brother Michel loading logs onto a wheelbarrow. The scenes focus most, however, on Brother Luc, the monk who in real life volunteered to nurse Nazi concentration camp inmates as a young man in occupied France. The scenes emphasize his connection with the people: he is shown gathering medicine to take to the dispensary which he inaugurated at the monastery in 1946;²³ invited by a Muslim worker to a *khtana* celebration; gently examining a little Muslim girl with a horrific head wound and then delighting her with new shoes from a bag of donations; and advising a young woman who works at the monastery on the nature of real love. He confesses to her that decades before he was in love several times—but then he encountered a love “even greater” and he “answered that love.”²⁴

Answering “that love” is clearly key to the mission of all these men, though the focus on Brother Luc in the opening scenes highlights the importance of healthcare ministry in this impoverished, if picturesque, region. Each scene helps to embed the French monks not just in the culture but also in the community. That community is composed of Christians and Muslims—people together seeking to follow God in the best way possible and with kindness. It is, perhaps, a somewhat idealized version of what an everyday life dedicated to God is all about, yet it sets up for viewers an ethically normative state against which to judge the eruption of violence that breaks into the story when a distressed Muslim tells the brothers an eighteen-year-old girl, his relative, was murdered on a bus for not wearing a *hijab*. By their presence, service, and engagement, the monks epitomize John XXIII’s ideal of “Christians

²⁰ Quoted in Naylor, *France and Algeria*, 232.

²¹ Gittins, Anthony J., “The Mission of the Church: A Parish Ministry Perspective, Part 2,” *Touchstone* 17, no. 3 (Spring 2002): 5.

²² Quoted in Veilleux, “The Witness of the Tibhirine Martyrs.”

²³ Veilleux, “The Witness of the Tibhirine Martyrs.”

²⁴ *Of Gods and Men*.

[as] the eighth sacrament and the only sacrament the nonbeliever could receive.”²⁵ But we also see the Muslims, the “common people,” as blessing in turn to the Christian monks. Love of neighbor is the guiding principal. And love of neighbor is precisely what is violated. By the time viewers are presented with the brutal murder of Croatian Christians along a road not far from the monastery—witnessed by a Muslim neighbor—they are aware that carrying out this mission will, for the monks as well as for their Muslim community, be a daunting and dangerous challenge. The film is dedicated to exploring the monks’ discernment of whether they should stick by Tibhirine and risk death or (perhaps more reasonably) abandon it for safety and, arguably, many more years of service to the Church. Brother Luc, who already practices medicine in trying circumstances, sets the bar for Christian discipleship high. Old, suffering from asthma himself, and facing “lots of hypertension” and even “shock” among his patients as the violence escalates around them, he nonetheless tells Christian, “Throughout my career I’ve met all sorts of different people. Including Nazis. And even the devil. I’m not scared of terrorists, even less of the army. And I’m not scared of death. I’m a free man.”²⁶

Freedom, the power to choose, is in some respects the greatest weapon (as it were) that the monks have against those who would violate their principles and their monastery with violence. On Christmas Eve, the armed insurgent al-Fayattia demands medicine and a doctor, threatening, “You have no choice.” Christian replies, “Yes. I do.” He goes on to say, “You know the Koran? ‘Those nearest in love to the believers are those who say, “We are Christians. And among them are priests and monks—. Then al-Fayattia breaks in, finishing the verse, “—and they wax not proud.” “That,” Christian adds, “is why we’re close to our neighbors.”²⁷ His appeal depends on an assumption of respectful interfaith dialogue, a shared kinship as children of Abraham, and a mutual understanding of ethical responsibility. In a violent situation, his gamble (for, although principled, a gamble it is) depends on an ability to discern sensitively and with wisdom. While the situation is not, technically, pastoral, it nonetheless accurately represents what might be considered the ultimate ministerial challenge: to know “what is the wise and healing word, the freeing word, the accepting word, the old yet radically new word, that we have to discern and to speak?”²⁸ It depends, Margaret Farley asserts, on what Karl Rahner identified as the fundamental call of the “human person . . . to a radical and free response in love for God and neighbor. In the heart of each person lies the capability of self-determination, of utter self-disposal, for better or for worse . . . an offer from divine freedom to human freedom.”²⁹ And in this respect Christian’s action is inherently pastoral, an example of successful intersubjectivity: a situation “where we use all our senses to perceive not only what may be coming up inside of us that could be getting in the way of our understanding of the other, but that we ‘tune in’ more deeply and empathetically with the other’s experience . . . a tool that can sensitize us to the sacred multiple truth, the *logos*, the ‘I am’ of each person.”³⁰ Christian’s choice—for himself and for his community—is rooted in a relational understanding of mission.

But that his is the wise, morally correct choice does not mean it was—or is presented as—the easy choice. Al-Fayattia, on learning he and his men have violently intruded at the monastery on Christmas Eve, apologizes and reaches out to shake hands with Christian. Christian pauses. To accept the potential enemy, the armed and violent enemy, as neighbor is the most demanding part of Jesus’ Great Commandment. In the film, the struggle, the uncertainty, and possibly even unwillingness is evident on Christian’s face. The two men do grasp hands. It is this connection,

²⁵ Mark Searle, *Called to Participate: Theological, Ritual, and Social Perspectives* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2006), 83.

²⁶ *Of Gods and Men*.

²⁷ *Of Gods and Men*.

²⁸ Margaret A. Farley, *Compassionate Respect: A Feminist Approach to Medical Ethics and Other Questions* (New York: Paulist Press, 2002), 13.

²⁹ Farley, *Compassionate Respect*, 52-53.

³⁰ Pamela Cooper-White, “Pastoral Care in Relational and Theological Perspectives,” *Spiritual and Psychological Aspects of Illness: Dealing with Sickness, Loss, and Death*, ed. Beverly A. Musgrave and Neil J. McGettigan (New York: Paulist Press, 2010), 35.

perhaps, which later allows Christian to pray over the corpse of the dead al-Fayattia, whose body has been ruthlessly dragged through the streets by enraged army militia, months later. This act of compassion for a man who, as the film makes clear, has committed heinous atrocities, earns Christian the contempt—and possibly more than contempt—



of the government forces. Yet the film takes care to emphasize that al-Fayattia was also a vulnerable human who called to his mother as he died in pain, surrounded by mocking enemies.³¹ Mission, Anthony Gittins reminds us, “is always characterized by outreach, inclusion, embrace, reconciliation, invitation, and healing.”³²

Mission demands of us a choice for compassion and forgiveness. We will not always like those we serve who are sick and dying, but we must love them. Mustering that love, finding the strength to make the Christ-like choice, depends on much more than mere good will or even an earnest desire to follow Jesus. The example of the Tibhirine monks as presented in *Of Gods and Men* makes that eminently clear. Anguish, suffering, guilt, and fear dog those who are called to love in the face of death. Despite the “holy-card” rays in which many still shots from the film depict Fr. Christophe, his soul battle is no less severe than Christ’s agony in the garden. All the monks of Tibhirine sweat blood.

Liturgy and Contemplation: Food for the Journey

Some would like to think that the disciples somehow knew all along that Jesus was meant to die and meant to rise again ...

But in their actual experience of their Lord being taken from them and hung on a cross, they were crushed, scandalized, filled with fear, and cast adrift.

That is how they experienced this particular death at the moment it occurred.

Edward Jeremy Miller³³

The freedom to choose is perhaps the greatest compliment God ever gave humanity and the most devastating challenge. For those seeking to serve God’s mission faithfully in the face of meaningless suffering, arbitrary violence, and unequivocal mortality, the strength needed to discern and then follow through on the right choice can seem gargantuan. Fr. Christophe most painfully and outwardly represents this in *Of Gods and Men*. He is vociferous about the fact that he did not join a monastery “to commit collective suicide”³⁴; he cries out in the night to an

³¹ *Of Gods and Men*.

³² Anthony J. Gittins, 6.

³³ Edward Jeremy Miller, “A Roman Catholic View of Death,” in *Death and Spirituality*, ed. Kenneth J. Doka and John D. Morgan (Amityville: Baywood Press, 1993), 35.

³⁴ *Of Gods and Men*. Wayne Teasdale matter-of-factly observes, “The monastic life is not a rejection of the world; it is a decision to engage with this world from a different dimension, from the enlarged perspective of love, as perceived by the Gospel in its utter simplicity and clarity” (quoted by Stephen B. Bevans and Roger Schroeder in *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 2004), 367. As Christophe discovers, the Gospel’s “utter simplicity and clarity” does not always make for easy choices. The road to Jerusalem may be simple and clear, but it is not, as Peter makes poignantly evident in Matthew 16: 22-23, the one a disciple most desires to follow.

absent God: “Help me, help me. Don’t abandon me,” his prayer echoing the desolate anguish of Christ’s last words in the Gospel of Mark (15:34). All the monks, the film makes clear, hear Christophe’s cry. In a community, no one suffers alone—and there is no place to hide from another’s pain. Celestin, who has the unenviable job of trying to secure the monastery grounds at night, seconds Christophe’s attitude, announcing, “I became a monk to live, not to sit back and have my throat slit.”³⁵ Considerable animosity is directed toward Christian for autonomously deciding that the monastery should reject military protection; he is accused by his brothers of violating the very ideal of community. Wrestling their way toward consensus on whether to remain at Tibhirine or leave for safer ground, they gather around a table on which a candle is lit. This scene of meeting is repeated throughout the film as the monks struggle with decision, with the power of choice. Behind them, a map of the world recalls the vast scope of God’s mission. Their own vulnerability—they are, after all, only nine men—is emphasized by its global expanse. Symbolically, the map can be seen as the monks’ call to celebrate Rahner’s “liturgy of the world,” their own participation in that history “composed of silent submission, responsibility unto death, mortality and joy, heights and sudden falls.”³⁶ After the initial meeting around that table, the monks, clearly struggling, gather for night prayers. Unlike in the first scene of the film, where they serenely (if somewhat sleepily) carry out the liturgy, here we find them huddled in the chapel, crouching, silent, strangely isolated from each other despite being in the same room.

In that room resides their “very help in time of trouble.”

Celebrating the liturgy of the world with integrity and right sacrifice depends, for the Christian and especially the Christian under stress, the rite and ritual that recalls the Word which revivifies, the prayer that orients toward grace, and the sacrament that strengthens through memory of what has been and awareness of what now is and must be.³⁷ The bucolic opening of the film, with its emphasis on the peaceful activities of normal days and life, is not without its own threat. As Richard Gaillardetz notes, “[W]e must acknowledge the danger that a preoccupation with the discovery of grace in daily life may lead us to overlook the demands that the life of grace places on us.”³⁸ Grace is not given for our self-satisfaction, though the gratitude and praise in life’s beauty that it can invoke certainly matters. Still, its primary role is to enhance our participation in the hard and sometimes painful work of bringing about the Kingdom. As Jeffrey Kauffman observes, “Openness to the pain of another is the difficult spiritual pathway of *compassion*”; it demands the ability to recognize and resist “our subtle denials, our whispers of self-assurance, our urges to fly from the agonizing emptiness, our dread and numbness,” and even our “‘passion to cure’ the helplessness of those we care for.”³⁹ The burden is immense and the demands profound. Though Jesus said “my yoke is easy and my burden light” (Mt 11: 28-30), the brutality of his crucifixion surely left his disciples with no illusions that they could take on that yoke unsupported by divine love. For the monks at Tibhirine, then, proper celebration of the liturgy of the world depends upon constant celebration of the liturgies of their Catholic, Christian call: the Liturgy of the Hours, the Liturgies of the Word and Eucharist, and (no less) the private liturgy and ritual of individual prayer and contemplation. Their mission among the people of Algeria to heal the sick, to clothe the poor, and love their neighbor utterly cannot succeed without the nourishment provided by liturgy and its nurturing of ecclesial community.

This is emphasized by the repeated interpolation of scenes of communal prayer (most notably the Liturgy of the Hours and the mass) throughout the film’s narrative. We first see the monks gathered at Night Prayer. Later, after

³⁵ *Of Gods and Men*.

³⁶ Rahner, “Secular Life and the Sacraments,” 267.

³⁷ The chapel is that place where sacraments “represent and make present in the particular something that is always happening.” See Beatrice Bruteau, *Radical Optimism: Practical Spirituality in an Uncertain World* (Boulder: Sentient Press, 2002), 4.

³⁸ Richard R. Gaillardetz, *Transforming Our Days: Finding God Amid the Noise of Modern Life* (Ligouri: Ligouri Press, 2007), 27.

³⁹ Jeffrey Kauffman, “Spiritual Perspectives on Suffering the Pain of Death,” in *Death and Spirituality*, ed. Kenneth J. Doka and John D. Morgan (Amyville: Baywood, 1993), 165-166.

word of the young girl's murder, the monks are shown sitting facing each other, silently, in the chapel. The Liturgy of the Hours, as Stanislaus Campbell holds, reinforces "at certain times of the day what the quality of all times should be, that is, an experience of time which is sacramental or revelatory of the mystery of Christ and a means of union with God in him."⁴⁰ The prayers contextualize the lives and choices of the monks. At a meeting with their Muslim neighbors, Br. Celestin admits, "We're like birds on a branch. We don't know if we'll be leaving," to which a woman responds, "You are the branch. If you go, we lose our footing." The scene immediately cuts to the monks concluding the Liturgy of the Hours with the Lord's Prayer—the part where supplicants pray to be forgiven their trespasses and delivered from evil. Later, Brother Luc treats a terrorist insurgent for infected gunshot wounds; this too is followed by a scene of the Liturgy of the Hours, the monks bowing and praying, "Glory be to the Father and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit..." When, upon concluding a painful conversation, Christian embraces a distraught Fr. Christophe, who cannot find meaning in either the actual or the potential suffering, we again hear and see the monks chanting, this time Psalm 143: "O Lord, hear my prayer / Listen to my cry for mercy... / My spirit grows faint within me, / my heart dismayed."⁴¹ Ritual communal prayer also unites the brothers to each other as church, strengthening them. Early on, after the massacre of the Croats and Christian's refusal of military protection, the monks pray, "Because he is with us in time of violence / Let us not dream / That he is everywhere / Other than where we die ... Let us not forego / The blood he shed / Let us break the bread/ Let us drink from the chalice of passage."⁴² By the time they at last commit as a group to staying—Jean-Pierre noting that "our mission here is not finished" while the once doubt-battered Christophe concludes joyfully, "Let God set the table here for everyone, friends and enemies"⁴³—they are ready to face the reality that the net of violence is closing in upon them. We see them sitting in prayer in the chapel. A military helicopter approaches and circles menacingly over the monastery. The alarmed men rise, then stand together facing the altar with their arms around each other, and begin to sing:

Our Father of Light, Eternal Light and source of all light,
You illuminate us at the threshold of the night with the radiance of your face ...
The shadows are for you not shadows ...
May our prayers before you rise like incense
and our hands like the evening offering.⁴⁴

They stand together as church, supporting each other in the moment and the mission. The ritual of the Liturgy of the Hours orders their lives as chaos descends. It serves less as a comforting spiritual prop than as the ultimate expression of their identity as persons committed to the God of light. It binds them as a community of disciples: united, they stand.⁴⁵ The helicopter leaves; the liturgy has given them strength to stay.⁴⁶

Eucharistic celebration similarly and with equal power punctuates the narrative as the monks decide to stay at Our Lady of Atlas and almost inevitably be martyred. They celebrate mass after Dom Christian rejects military

⁴⁰ Quoted in Gaillardetz, *Transforming Our Days*, 92.

⁴¹ *Of Gods and Men*.

⁴² *Of Gods and Men*.

⁴³ *Of Gods and Men*.

⁴⁴ *Of Gods and Men*.

⁴⁵ Armand Veilleux stresses, "The Mystical union with God was not lived by these brothers as so many isolated individuals but as a community; rather, their witness was communitarian."

⁴⁶ The decision to stay is profoundly in keeping with their monastic vow of stability, "which implies not only stability in the monastic vocation, but also in a concrete community and in a determinate place. ... Of course, an entire community can displace itself, but it cannot do so without taking into account the bonds established with the local society and culture" (Veilleux, "The Witness of the Tibhirine Martyrs").

protection, they celebrate mass again after the jarring Christmas Eve intrusion of al-Fayattia and his men, and they celebrate mass after determining that, come what may, their mission is to be with the people they serve, who have no choice whether to go or stay. The gospel reading at this final mass (and it will be their final Eucharistic celebration together) is portentous: Matthew 24: 40-41. “One will be taken, and one will be left.” The scene then cuts to show each monk receiving Eucharist. It is, for seven of the men (though they cannot know it), *viaticum*, “food for the passage through death to eternal life ... the completion and crown of Christian life on earth.”⁴⁷ This ritual banquet is followed by and paired with a scene that is arguably the climax of the film: a final meal together, an *agape* celebration where in sharing fine wine and listening to the lovely strains of Tchaikovsky’s *Swan Lake*, the monks at once enjoy the tremendous beauty of life and being alive and also bid it *adieu*. Their increasingly sober expressions and tears underscore a series of close-up shots that culminate with Christian’s eyes looking straight into the camera. Having celebrated the Paschal Mystery, they are called upon to live it, fed by “the sacramental-liturgical encounter” with Jesus so as to realize the “ongoing mission of meeting him in lives of service patterned on his historical mission.”⁴⁸ Mark Searle eloquently notes:

The paschal mystery we rehearse ritually cannot be detached from the paschal mystery lived by the victims of violence, poverty, and disease, by those who are marginalized and oppressed, by the “little ones” of this world. The prayer that rises like incense is the prayer of the ovens of Dachau, the prayer of the streets of Calcutta, the prayer of the woman beaten by her lover, the prayer of the child tortured by his own parents, the prayer of the hungry of Mexico’s barrios, the prayer of the AIDS victims. The litany is endless. In the liturgy we join our prayers with theirs, put their prayers into words. A priestly people. A people who can offer in memory the sacrifice of the whole Christ, the passion of Jesus and the passion of the poor, the “little ones” of our generation.⁴⁹

Simon Chan rightly notes, “Eucharistic worship does not end in cozy fellowship, but in costly mission to the world.”⁵⁰ That said, what follows this pairing of shared communions at altar and at refectory table is (despite its potentially sensational content) mere denouement. The great choice, the ultimate exercise of human freedom that a frightened but committed Jesus of Nazareth articulated with the words, “Not my will, but yours be done” (Lk 22: 42), has already been made.⁵¹ The subsequent and terrifying night raid in which seven of the Tibhirine monks are hustled away in vans, the grim scene of them speaking into a microphone for those holding them captive, and the final vision of them trudging to death through a heavy snowstorm—each face etched with the brutal physical and emotional reality of death (and violent death at that)—is mere postscript. As the prior Christian reassured Fr. Christophe during the months of discernment, “Remember, you’ve already given your life. You gave it by following Christ when you decided to leave everything to come to the abbey at Tibhirine ... We’re martyrs out of

⁴⁷ From the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Pastoral Care of the Dying* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2002), 45. Of *viaticum* Bruce Morrill writes, “The healing Christ’s Spirit mediates through sacramental rites is the affirmation of the sick person’s inestimable value before God and people and the renegotiation of the person’s mission in life. The foundation of that mission of following Christ was made in baptism (the irreversible permanent condition of every Christian), but the details continuously emerge over the unique course of each individual’s living and finally dying in that call,” 140-41.

⁴⁸ Morrill, *Divine Worship and Human Healing*, 99.

⁴⁹ Searle, *Called to Participate*, 85.

⁵⁰ Quoted by Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 363.

⁵¹ That this choice is at once self-emptying and self-gifting is apparent even in the small moments of joy which culminate in the refectory celebration. As Paul Metzler points out, “Living with dying means appreciating life, even as it grows shorter, living each day with gratitude and faithful confidence that joy, growth, and love can thrive, even in the face of death. Thus life itself is sanctified on the journey to death. Holy living and holy dying are joined.” See Paul A. Metzler, “Holy Living, Holy Dying,” in *Spiritual and Psychological Aspects of Illness*, 224.

love, out of fidelity ... Our mission here is to be brothers to all. Remember that love is eternal hope. Love endures everything.”⁵² Living out—to death—the implications of such love is easier for those who have been nourished by prayer, the support of ecclesial community, and the grace-filled gift of communal worship. In the words of Margaret Farley, “There is a love stronger than death, a crucified love that does not turn away from swords of sorrow, and that goes forth unconditionally no matter what the forces of evil may do against it. The point of the cup and the cross is not death, but that relationships can hold.”⁵³

In Perfect Charity with the World

I think that real faith is when nothing is going right
and you know it will not happen the way you want and then you believe anyway. ...
Doesn't that sound like faith, Mom?

17-year-old cancer patient⁵⁴

The great vocation of the minister is to continuously make connections
between the human story and the divine story.
We have inherited a story which needs to be told in such a way
that the many painful wounds about which we hear day after day
can be liberated from their isolation and be revealed as part of God's relationship with us.
Healing means revealing that our human wounds are most intimately connected
with the suffering of God.

Henri Nouwen⁵⁵

When the dangers became clear for foreigners in Algeria, many felt that the monks, as opposed to other missionaries, should go because “they could live their life of prayer anywhere”; Veilleux rightly points out that this “was to misunderstand their life completely.”⁵⁶ He explains, “The contemplative life is not lived in the abstract. It is always incarnated, rooted in a concrete place and cultural context. The Tibhirine monks in no way wanted to be martyrs; they were not visionaries.”⁵⁷ More to the point, perhaps, for the purposes of those seeking how to better support their own ministries among the sick and dying, is that mission, liturgy, and spirituality cannot in *any* vocation subsist without each other. *Of Gods and Men* illustrates that without constant prayer, without eloquent ritual, and without the love of ecclesial community and a love for the greater community which they served, the men at Tibhirine's abbey would likely not have been able to embrace the choice that they did. As Richard Gaillardetz stresses, “Only by hearing God's Word proclaimed (*kerygma*), by common worship and the celebration of the sacraments (*leitourgia*), by experiencing Christian fellowship (*koinonia*), and by engaging in actions of committed service to others (*diakonia*) can we grow as followers of Christ.”⁵⁸ Further, for those called to positions of leadership, as Prior Christian was, contemplative prayer away from the group can also be of significant help. In a beautiful montage,

⁵² *Of Gods and Men*.

⁵³ Farley, *Compassionate Respect*, 78.

⁵⁴ Quoted by Neil McGettigan, “Life as a Shimmering Shadow: Life, Loss, and Death Thereafter,” in *Spiritual and Psychological Aspects of Illness: Dealing with Sickness, Loss, Dying, and Death*, ed. Beverly A. Musgrave and Neil J. McGettigan (New York: Paulist Press, 2010), 64.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Michelle O'Rourke, *Befriending Death: Henri Nouwen and a Spirituality of Dying* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 2009), 114.

⁵⁶ “The Witness of the Tibhirine Martyrs.”

⁵⁷ “The Witness of the Tibhirine Martyrs.”

⁵⁸ *Transforming Our Days*, 65.

the film shows how at a crucial point Christian, like Jesus, retreats to the wilderness to pray: wandering amid giant trees, sitting beside still waters, and (in a symbolically freighted scene) hiking among a flock of restless sheep and goats.⁵⁹



The camera's panoramic sweep of the landscape and the way it traces the flight of birds across a wide, empty sky emphasizes not only the desert nature of Christian's retreat but also how God's creation puts human struggle into perspective. Sustained by prayer both with and in isolation from the community, Christian finds the strength to support his fellow brothers, to continue living in dialogue and love with the poor Algerians terrorized by internecine war, and (not least) to hold himself together physically, psychologically, and spiritually in a period of personal and vocational crisis. In the film's final scene we see him supporting the weakened Brother Luc—whose own prayer was “God, grant us the grace to die without hatred in our hearts”⁶⁰—during the monk's march into the snowy fog of death. Christian not only dies without hatred, he dies in thanksgiving, in love of the neighbor who is friend and of the neighbor who might reasonably be considered enemy. Addressing the executioner he could only imagine, he wrote in what is known as his Testament, “And also you, the friend of my last minute, who will not know what you are doing. Yes for you also I wish this THANK YOU, this “A-Dieu,” for in God's face I see yours. And let it be given to us to find ourselves there, two happy thieves in paradise, if it please God, the Father of us both.”⁶¹ This expression of camaraderie (if you will) and of generous forgiveness springs from a prayer-nurtured intimacy that makes it possible for one “to see in the other ... the image of God”⁶² and allows one to *live* forgiveness as a “healer, mender, restorer, and peace-maker.”⁶³ It is an intimacy that makes us greater, more authentic participants in the “sublime and terrible liturgy” of the world, “aligning us with God's purposes in the world and ... opening [us] up so that God's will may be done in us and in God's creation; it transforms us into more available partners with God's work.”⁶⁴ It allows us to begin to realize the full, Spirit-infused power of discipleship. “God walks in us and through us,” says Pamela Cooper-White, “incarnate in history” and present “in the bloody realities of concrete, fleshy living and dying.”⁶⁵ For those who have dedicated themselves to the service of the sick and the dying, the catechetical lessons of *Of Gods and Men* are clear: take time for prayer, communal and individual; rely on the ordering beauty of church ritual; allow the sacraments, especially Eucharist, to feed and sustain you in memory of not only Christ's passion but also Christ's rising; be fed by the Word of God written in Scripture and in Nature; and expect to find the face of God in *every* neighbor. Summing up the story of their painful struggle to make a meaningful choice within the context of hatred and senseless violence, Christian reminds his brothers that “We did all we had to do ... We sang the mass ... we found salvation in undertaking our daily

⁵⁹ Benedict XVI, citing Gregory the Great, stresses that “the good pastor must be rooted in contemplation. Only in this way will he be able to take upon himself the needs of others and make them his own.” See his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* (Vatican City, 2006), no. 7. So must the good doctor, the good nurse, the good social worker, the good chaplain, the good neighbor.

⁶⁰ Quoted in Veilleux, “The Witness of the Tibhirine Martyrs.”

⁶¹ Quoted in Veilleux, “The Witness of the Tibhirine Martyrs.” For complete text of the “Testament” in English, see Karl A. Plank's article “‘When an A-Dieu Takes on a Face’: The Last Testament of Christian de Chergé, O.C.S.O.,” *Spiritual Life* 53, no. 3 (2007): 137-147.

⁶² See Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 18.

⁶³ Kathleen A. Cahalan, “Toward a Fundamental Theology of Ministry,” *Worship* 80, no. 2 (2006): 113.

⁶⁴ Bevans, *Constants in Context*, 367.

⁶⁵ “Pastoral Care in Relational and Theological Perspective,” 27-28.

tasks. The kitchen, the garden, the prayers, the bells day after day.”⁶⁶ Also among these daily tasks were caring for the sick, work and prayer, the Benedictine motto, and unconditional love for those around them and for each other.⁶⁷ “Greater love has no man than this,” said Jesus, “than to give his life for his friends” (Jn 15:13). Admittedly, the sacrifice, the perpetual engagement with death, can at times feel like too much, the challenge to faith too brutal. But, Christian maintains, “Our identities as [humans] go from one birth to another. And from birth to birth we’ll each end up bringing to the world the child of God that we are ... The mystery of incarnation remains what we are going to live.”⁶⁸

Where is God in the suffering, heartache, and loss of these individuals (and countless others) in Algeria? Of those people destroyed in the World Trade Center, Afghanistan, and Iraq? Of that young cancer patient who is dying with her head on her pillow? God is where he has always been: “in the acts of compassion that were [and are] everywhere observed amid the very real pain of these events,”⁶⁹ not necessarily “removing the pain, but ... securing safe passage through it.”⁷⁰ In our actions, however humble, in our love, there is the incarnate God, living out God’s mission, Jesus’ healing ministry, through us. May we be strengthened for this mission by our prayer and our song, by our ritual and our silence, by our life in the Church and also beyond the Church, realizing what Jeremy Taylor called “perfect charity with the world.”⁷¹ Where charity and love prevail, there God is ever found.

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⁶⁶ *Of Gods and Men*.

⁶⁷ For an in-depth discussion of unconditional love, see Bruteau, *Radical Optimism*, 111 ff.

⁶⁸ *Of Gods and Men*.

⁶⁹ Jane F. Maynard, *Transfiguring Loss: Julian of Norwich as a Guide for Survivors of Traumatic Grief* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2006), 196.

⁷⁰ Kauffman, “Spiritual Perspectives,” 170.

⁷¹ Quoted in Metzler, “Holy Living, Holy Dying,” 226.