

The Daughters of Charity in Tunisia

*by a group of Daughters of Charity
North Africa Province*

Tunisia, like most of the Maghreb, is a Moslem country where Christians are a small minority and for the most part foreigners. The Church was implanted there in the earliest centuries. Cyprian, Tertullian in Tunisia, Augustine in Algeria and many other celebrated names recall its vitality. Moslems were to arrive in the 7th century.

Today the faith of Christians is respected. The Church recognises its smallness, the paucity of its means and at the same time the immense richness which it possesses: the Good News of Jesus, to which it wants to bear witness and which is its essential hallmark for its meeting with the men and women in whose midst it exists.

The Daughters of Charity arrived in Tunisia in 1896 at the request of the Resident General in order to take responsibility for a crèche which would welcome all nationalities. Today we are 9 sisters in 2 communities situated in Tunis and in the suburbs. We don't have works run solely by the community but we participate in the mission of the Church through ecclesial institutions (school, Caritas which serves migrants, service to senior-age foreigners), Tunisian associations (support for the handicapped, support for school, support for abandoned women), or foreign NGOs. Due to shortage of sisters we have discontinued home care visits.

If the community doesn't have particular DC works, the local Church possesses schools, study centres, and a clinic. The work of the sisters, who are and will be non-nationals, will always function with some uncertainty.

- The schools: after independence and the modus vivendi between Church and State, the Church was asked to retain its schools: eight primary, one secondary, three technical schools. All the students are Tunisian and Moslem. Thus the schools have the official programme of Islamic education. They are inspected regularly. Two Daughters of Charity work in them. Some facts:
 - A committed Tunisian educated by the sisters was saying to me "I've been taught to give what I can, and to help; now I can't do anything else, there's no way out!
 - When children aged 8 begin learning a language, this is already putting them in contact with another culture, with people who are different; they begin to learn that their culture is not unique.

- Setting up an active method when the education system, and perhaps also the social and religious system, favours repetition, is not easy; but learning to reflect of oneself isn't a matter of little consequence.
- The Tunisian associations which serve the handicapped: one sister works with the deaf, two others with the multihandicapped in a local area association. The aim is through showing love to these persons to find the means of getting them to go out from home, to give them when possible some formation, to help them to reflect, to get them to be accepted in the neighbourhood and in their family.
- Service to women abandoned with their children: a slow working with these women is required so that they might recover their dignity; likewise with their child and with their family when possible. Immigrant African women in difficult circumstances are numerous, and a sister has answered a Caritas appeal to serve them.

One of the conclusions of our provincial assembly: “Even though we are immersed in a Moslem milieu we are all the more called there to live out the Good News through the corporal and spiritual service of the poor. Matthew 25 is a page of the Gospel which practise daily. It is the universal Gospel message which everyone can receive, whatever their faith”.

(Translator: STANISLAUS BRINDEY, C.M.)