

The “Stripping” of the Church in Algeria

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1. Introduction

This essay I present to you is well placed. It is a particular experience, a moment of history in a region of North Africa, concerning the Church in Algeria. Not being a theologian, I have been helped by documents written by bishops, theologians, and witnesses who know this particular history. New paths have been laid out and ideas shared for the mission in the Muslim world.

The title of our symposium is: “Put out into the deep”. In order to move forward, we must leave that which holds us back, perhaps which hems us in, in all cases that which prevents us from moving ahead! So I am going to begin by recalling some of the stages that allowed the Church in Algeria to move where she had not necessarily thought of going, or at least where she had not chosen to go. To put out into the deep, to experience the journeys, it is sometimes necessary – always? – to allow oneself to be led by events! Is not that the way the Spirit breathes?! It is a matter of trust!

2. The stages that led to the Church’s ‘stripping’

The fate of the Church in Algeria has been marked from the country’s independence **in 1962** with the departure of a million Europeans, almost all Christians, who, for the most part, lived next to the Muslims in a type of common “bubble” as Bishop Pierre Claverie said. They were accompanied in this departure by several thousand Algerian Christians. They were Christians rooted in their country. The first shock: *the Church was deprived of its faithful!* She had to reposition herself; many priests and religious went into formation and health care. The arrival of aid workers such as teachers and technicians gave back a small breath of life; these latter were responsible for the Church’s Christian witness in this Algerian Muslim society. These Christians came from elsewhere and for a time, even if some have settled in Algeria until the present. **The first stage of our Church’s stripping!**

In 1976, the nationalization of works took place! *Here the Church was deprived of what made her visible*: parishes, schools, hospitals; that which gave her gravitas! Almost 700 churches and chapels were transformed into mosques, cultural centers, and annexes to public schools! To this we must add the Algerianization of executives, which had the effect of severely restricting the Church's involvement in the professional sector, both public and private, to where today, it is almost impossible for a priest, religious, or even a foreign layperson to be hired in an Algerian organization. **The second stage of our Church's stripping!** The Church has no other choice but to accept being nothing more than a discreet and hidden presence in the midst of the population.

In 1993, there was what is called the "black decade" with the place of the GIA [Armed Islamic Group], which wanted to rid the country of Jews, Christians, and "unbelievers" from the Muslim land because these latter had spent many years spreading evil in Africa¹. It was thus that the departure of almost all the Christian families took place, including those belonging as Catholic Algerians. Half of the women's religious communities had to leave the areas of their service, as well as the Poor Clares and the Little Sisters of the Poor. Out of 222 women religious in 93, three years later there were only 70 left! The new community reformed after independence left. **The third stage of our Church's stripping!** It must be added that the 'black decade' blocked renewal of the Church's permanent members for more than ten years, thus widening the gap between those present in the country a long time and the younger ones who bring different ecclesial sensitivities. We must recognize that to put into deep water shakes things up, requires another outlook, and brings risks!

Between 8 May 1994 and 1 August 1996, 19 religious men and women were assassinated. "*For a few weeks*, wrote Father, at the time bishop, Teissier, *we found ourselves before the risk of seeing the fundamentalist violence make our Church in Algeria disappear definitively*"². This was **the fourth stripping**, which Father Teissier called the physical death.

More recently (2006), the law on non-Muslim worship, from then on, poses a sword of Damocles over the modest platforms of Church service, which like most of the country's associative activities, entirely at the mercy of the authorities. This, we can say, is a paralysis.

¹ "...in the political framework of the clearing out of Jews, Christians, and unbelievers from the Muslim land of Algeria, a GIA brigade set up an ambush in which it killed two crusaders who had spent many years spreading evil in Africa..." Leaflet distributed.

² Bishop HENRI TEISSIER, *Chrétiens en Algérie [Christians in Algeria]*, DDB, pp. 63-64.

So, over the course of time, the events of the country's history have impoverished our Church, weakened it, and stripped it! Thus freed, she discovered and became aware that she is in the midst of a people of a different faith, which she begins to look at face to face. This is the first surprise for her, who is putting out into the deep, losing sight of the usual horizon! This successive stripping, which necessarily led to conversions, allowed her to resituate herself, to question herself, and to open herself; in that, does she not join the experience of the first Christian communities?! I quote Father Teissier:

*"It is really a matter of a new understanding, by the Church, of her mission in her relation to a people, who do not share her faith. She is rooted in the conviction that there is a gift of God to be put to work by the meeting among persons of different religious traditions, in this case, Christians and Muslims. Beyond the vagaries of history, prejudices, and resentments, fraternity without borders is part of the Church and Christian-Islamic friendships evangelize both parties by which they learn to communicate to each other the gift of God, for each one's greater fidelity in his soul and conscience. These convictions are a very special contribution of the Church in Algeria to the life of the universal Church at the end of the 20th century"*³. *"Every human being is the object of God's affection and we have a mission to serve this tenderness of God"*⁴.

Cardinal Duval already affirmed:

*"The Church must live with and for everyone, because the great commandment of Christ is fraternal love; thus the Church lives for humanity. "How can the Church be faithful to Christ's Spirit if she is not attentive to the graces that the Spirit pours into the human heart? I am convinced that the practice of fraternal love is the manifestation of the Christian message. It is through it that the truth of the Gospel is made known"*⁵. *"It seems that our meeting with our Muslim brothers in the Maghreb must place the reestablishment of trust among men and women, whom history has too often set against one another, first among our objectives; [...] respect for persons is one of the most fundamental expressions of evangelical love. It cannot flourish except on a terrain of true humility"*⁶.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50.

⁴ MARTINE DE SAUTO, *Henri Teissier, un évêque en Algérie* [Henri Teissier, *A Bishop in Algeria*], Bayard, 2006.

⁵ MARIE CHRISTINE RAY, *Le cardinal Duval, un homme d'espérance en Algérie* [Cardinal Duval, *A Man of Hope in Algeria*], Cerf, 1998, pp. 128-129.

⁶ CERNA [Conference of Bishops of the North African Region], 4 May 1979.

3. Weakness allows the Church to welcome the gift of God!

Our Church finds herself without specific places to carry out her mission of charity (schools, hospitals, etc.) and practically without people. She is led to turn toward the people with whom she lives and to understand that she receives a mission for this people who are Muslim. Put out into the deep means a stripping, but it opens other horizons and allows her to be attentive to others, present at the side of those whose otherness is a source of wealth and communion! It allows her to be led into the deep without knowing well what she is going to discover, receive, be called to give, yet with the certainty that the Master is on board. This is not done without suffering, but the wounds of the different passages for going out into the deep are like the gaps through which the Holy Spirit breathes! God gives her a gift. She is ready to receive it!

"Beyond these sufferings, or rather within these sufferings, we have deepened our mission and our relations with our Muslim partners. ***We are living the mission in weakness.*** The Christian people are no longer there, but there is still a people in Algeria; it is the Muslim people but they are the people whom God gives us to meet, to serve, to love and with whom we must carry out the work of salvation. We strive to live in truth a Gospel relationship with the persons and communities who are Muslim; but they are brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ"⁷.

With few remaining and numerically small, the Church discovers more deeply that God has tenderness and that he shows it to every human being. It is there that she has a mission to carry out in relationship with her Muslim partners.

She is not only small in number, but even more so spiritually; weakness that is similar to that of Jesus, the Servant, which calls us to be close to those who are far away and from whom we could remain distant (Phil 2:6-7). "*Weakness is not a virtue in itself, but the expression of a fundamental reality of our being, which unceasingly must be renewed, informed, fashioned by faith, hope, and love in order to allow itself to conform to Christ's weakness, to Christ's humanity*" wrote Christian Chessel, a young White Father shortly before his assassination. He continued:

"If weakness is chosen, it becomes one of the most beautiful languages to speak God's 'discreta caritas' for mankind, both charity full of discernment, but also the discreet charity of someone who wanted to share the weakness of our human condition. To learn our helplessness and become aware of the radical poverty of our being before God

⁷ TEISSIER, *op. cit.*

can only be an invitation, a pressing call to create with others relationships of non-power. Having learned to recognize my weakness, I can not only accept that of others, but see in it a call to bear it, to make it mine in the imitation of Christ”⁸.

Thus we have opened another dialog, another way of reading the Gospel and living it in the midst of the Muslim people. This confirms the testimony of a Little Sister of Jesus on the occasion of the funeral of a priest, Pierre L., who died suddenly in November 2010. The cathedral was three-quarters full of Muslims:

“...the funeral, with all those young Muslims in tears, had no need for commentary. I could not help but feel the force of this small and hidden Church’s witness, loving without asking for compensation. I sensed it better and you could almost touch how much this form is the very essence of the Church in Algeria, in her insignificant number, in her invisibleness, in not claiming her rights, in her humble and daily meeting, nothing more, with the other and so close in her humanity. This form of presence is the word of the Gospel that the Lord wanted to plant there, and no one I hope has the right to root it out”⁹.

And this testimony of a Muslim, a doctor, after these ten difficult years:

“I believe that it is God who wants the Church’s presence in our Islamic land [...] you are a cutting on Algeria’s tree which, if God so wishes, will blossom toward the light of God”.

The sending on mission in Matthew 28 is to be understood with Matthew 25 or Luke 10: the Last Judgment and the Good Samaritan put, at the center of our mission, love toward whomever and on what we will be judged: “What have you done to your brother or sister, what love have you given him or her?”. It is, then, this relationship with the other which gives meaning to our being sent: our closeness to one another, Christians and Muslims. To welcome a Muslim who becomes Christian is good, but to welcome a Muslim who wishes to remain Muslim is also good. It is our mission and the path already opened by Brother Charles de Foucauld, universal brother, and which takes up what the Bishops of CERNA said¹⁰:

“The Gospel is Good News for all. The life of every person and community, inhabited by the Spirit, is God’s gift to Christians. It is our

⁸ Presented by Msgr. Claude Rault in an issue of the magazine, *Spiritus*.

⁹ Little Sister Maria Chiara in *Rencontre*, January 2011, p. 27.

¹⁰ Conference of Bishops of the North African Region.

duty to gather the generous, positive signs that the Spirit puts into every person. The Muslim religious tradition is a place of authentic spiritual experience and becomes a sign that God gives us. It is a sharing of humanity by which the mission, which is to welcome and fructify God's gift everywhere that it has been placed by the Spirit, is fulfilled!”.

The tragic events, experienced by all, have established this conviction that God's Spirit acts in the heart of every person to associate him/her to the Paschal Mystery, to this way of death and resurrection. This conviction has supported each member of the community during this entire crisis. It was the fundamental motive for the fidelity of the “martyrs”. This new look at the mystery of salvation at work in the life of our Islamic brothers and sisters has been one of the determining elements of the change of our Christian community's attitude in relation to the Muslim community.

“You have done well to choose to live with this people, to share its joys and pains. You have chosen or it is God who has chosen for you [...] I would not be logical if I did not say that your existence on this land and with this people has gone beyond you, because a part of you belongs to us. One cannot exist somewhere without belonging, in some way, to the other” (this quote came from a Muslim teacher who has a degree in Islamic sciences).

Thus, the community of Algerian Christians is led to become simply “sign and servant of God's gift for all the people, welcome of God's gift made to the other, to serve the tenderness of God”. It is a matter of a meeting, of a sharing that God entrusts to us in order that reconciliation, mutual recognition, friendship, and communion finally come.

“In fact, you live what the Council said of the Church as sacrament, that is, a sign. We do not ask for a sign to increase our numbers, but to be a sign”¹¹.

4. The meeting, God's gift, becomes a sacrament!

“As Christian minorities, we find ourselves in a situation of radical dependence with regard to the Algerian society. That makes us poor persons in the sense that we have no power in our hands [...] this defenseless condition increased with the threats of armed groups on our life. But, by grace, we often were able to assume this unarmed

¹¹ John Paul II to the Bishops of the CERNIA during the *ad limina* visit in 1986.

existence as a gift from God, who gives us to our brothers and sisters” (Henri Teissier).

The real meeting terrain is that where we are given together to our brothers and sisters in daily services; it is the place where the dimension of charity is lived out; where the “discreta caritas” of God is implemented, and where the gratuity of love is to be seen: in centers for the handicapped, Catholic Charities, University Cultural Centers, extra help with school work, promotion of women, the health field where some sisters succeed in getting jobs through friendship or relationships, etc. All this is a social terrain and a spiritual terrain!

In these places, there are solutions to be found with regard to the best way of loving each other, of serving him/her, and these solutions are found by Christians and Muslims who, in order to do so, each lean on the basis of his/her conviction of conscience. It is they who seek together and give appropriate responses in which they are involved. Each one tries to listen to what God says to him/her through the Bible or through the Koran. It is not neutral and God is committed in these places and in these decisions. The sacrament of meeting between Christian and non-Christian can account for what happens here.

*“Our littleness and the precariousness of our situation do not give us a big place in our societies. But, by this very fact, these two elements become a sign of the very free love of God for our peoples”*¹².

“The foundation of dialog is to witness to and act in charity and for charity. This means that it is the dialog of life which does not die but is reborn from its ashes and stands the test of time and humanity” (Msgr. Sleiman).

*“Interreligious dialog does not aim at conversion, but rather at looking, listening, seeing what we have in common at the service of society, peace, and social cohesion”. “This seems like little, one must admit, but it is very difficult”*¹³.

The service of the poor is truly a place where Christians and non-Christians can collaborate and seek together God’s presence. In order for this world of communion among men and women to happen, there must be a meeting among men and women. Every day we are edified by the gift God gives to others, as a priest, a friend of Pierre, testifies:

“Pierre lived his priesthood by offering hospitality in his rectory to many people, by saving lives, by visiting the unfortunate, by attending

¹² CERNA, 18 November 1999.

¹³ Cardinal Tauran, Thursday, 17 March 2011.

the marriages of his Muslim student friends, by teaching, by literacy work, and by wanting to help others grow. The testimonies insist on Pierre’s remarkable generosity; they tell us of the fruitfulness of a priesthood rich in friendship. Pierre only celebrated a few baptisms, marriages, and funerals, but for years he never ceased administering the sacrament of fraternity, an integral part of the Eucharistic life. Ubi caritas ibi Deus est”.

Or again this testimony of two Muslims:

“...What now remains of him is the courage and enthusiasm that he transmitted in order to help us move forward and the light to enlighten each one of us on the path of life in order to bring us a bit closer every day to the great human wealth that he embodied so well: the gift of self”¹⁴.

In order to give this sacrament to one another, we must be sacrament-persons, that is to say, we have to be signs for one another and servants of the gift that God gives to each one and one by the other. Pierre was one of those persons!

Basing himself on the Church Fathers and on the theology of Vatican II, the theologian, Christoph Theobald¹⁵ recalls that sacraments, before being signs and ritual practices, are persons, sacrament persons, who risk themselves in a real relationship with the other they meet. The Church herself is a sacrament in the measure in which she puts herself at the service of this relationship in truth in order to therein signify the presence of Christ.

The future of the Church is born there where our partners recognize us as concerned with them by the values which make people and the human community in Algeria grow. These values are a gift of God. Those who have this experience want a future for the Church, as an Algerian testifies:

“The presence of religious, their sacrifice, their gift of self, and their work are a comfort for all those who, at times, falter and lose hope. By this living example of God, they pull themselves together, regain confidence, and continue. The Church in Algeria gives us the occasion to learn to struggle so that humanity might grow in justice, truth, liberty, solidarity, and fraternity”.

¹⁴ H. Saidani and M. Rabhi in *Liberté*, 4 December 2010.

¹⁵ CHRISTOPH THEOBALD, *Présences d’Evangile: Lire les Evangiles et l’Apocalypse en Algérie et ailleurs* [Gospel Presences: Reading the Gospels and the Apocalypse in Algeria and Elsewhere], published by Atelier, 2003.

The Church's situation is inseparable from the situation of the societies to which it is grafted. It is in the very measure in which the Church shares to the end, without skirting, the path experienced by all the people, as a process of meeting and shared birth: birth of a country, birth of a Church to its vocation to be the sacrament of salvation, that this is played out. According to the conception of Christoph Theobald, it is: *"Not a salvation deferred to the afterlife, but a salvation here and now because salvation is that every person, to the last, hears in his/her life the word 'Blessed', this word of the Beatitudes which summarizes the Gospel entirely and which the Apocalypse sings"*.

Again, according to Christoph Theobald, the term that seems to best summarize this new understanding of the mission is that of "presence"¹⁶, which summarizes the following convictions – the Spirit precedes us; the Spirit is already present and active/actor:

- it is the call to be present in the today, at the center of life (an active presence, a listening, a meeting of solidarity)
- we do not control the gift (fruit) of the meeting.

*"With the monks, we see in what sense the Gospel and the shocks of history led them to transform their attachment to a land and a space in their own walls into a passion for an inhabited land, for the space made of men and women, here harassed by poverty and violence; to remain became **to remain with** the population and stability became **solidarity with** the population no matter what happened. [...] If the Muslims are shown as loved, even to not only living but dying for them, dying with them, it is because they are first perceived as lovable: lovable by love of kindness, of reciprocity, of friendship, born of and in their prayer too"*¹⁷.

5. God's surprises which shake up our Church!

*"We pray to the Holy Spirit, author of every apostolic initiative, that he might give us from stage to stage the evangelical boldness and the courage to invent what is required by new situations"*¹⁸.

Yes, the Spirit works and leads always elsewhere, always to openness. So phenomena have come to jostle the missionary conscience of

¹⁶ Christoph Theobald prefers the term presence to the term witness (which connotes a context of process) or accompaniment (which connotes a certain condescendence).

¹⁷ Dominique Motte, O.P., in a lecture about the film at Gruson in France.

¹⁸ The Bishops of the CERNA, 17 June 1997.

our Church. To put out into the deep is an occasion to welcome surprises, God’s winks. The Church’s vitality is revealed elsewhere and in other ways! We have to be ready to welcome what is offered, what is given to the Church which permits her to continue her mission as she has discovered it without remaining immobilized.

As God’s surprises¹⁹, we note:

- The influx of sub-Saharan **students**, which make up a majority of the Church’s laity, even if in recent times some “expatriates” (young families) come for work; to these are added members of the DCC²⁰ and VIPs. The name “sub-Saharan students” hides a very great diversity of nationalities, languages, and cultural and ecclesial traditions and it is with all this that we have to make community! Let us point out that the young people, without having chosen it, find themselves in the vanguard of the meeting, by the daily contact that they experience with Algerian students in the universities and in the cities. It is a sharing of a very close life, which has its repercussions: tensions, discoveries, shared friendships, etc. As Christians, they live immediately the Church’s mission at the center of the Muslim world. Their presence obliges us to be attentive to this population, to accompany them, to offer them a sacramental life and formation. That has not been simple: “We are there first of all for the Algerians, the Muslims”!
- To these young students is added the flood of **migrants** who stop in Algeria on the route that leads them toward Europe. They are remaining there longer and longer and some of them settle there! They are becoming increasingly numerous and invite us to “reinvest” in a usual pastoral ministry. To form it from this diversity of communities is a real challenge! The only common denominator is that they are here in Algeria. They come with family and build another family here. They too live in the midst of the Muslims, working with and for them. They are, like the students, first in line to witness to Christ. *“The renouncement of proselytizing in order to gain the ‘right’ to exist in Muslim countries and the reluctance to engage in student ministry (to keep the priority to presence with the Algerians) are shaken up by a new outbreak of the universal”*.
- Another surprise and not the least is the emergence of **Algerian Christians**. *“Even as the decision not to proselytize was almost a consensus within the Church, here in another way, without direct*

¹⁹ H.J. GAGEY, *Actes de l’Assemblée interdiocésaines d’Algérie [Minutes of the Interdiocesan Assembly of Algeria]*, 2004.

²⁰ DCC: Delegation of Christian Aid Workers.

relation to the discreet witness by the Catholics, groups of Jesus' disciples are forming. Some knock at the Catholic Church's door, but most define themselves as Evangelical Christians and fully intend to form the authentic Church in Algeria". This is another new opening due to the fact of putting out into the deep and which allows for open pursuit: *how to establish a bridge with these unexpected brothers, and this without cutting off the relationship with our Muslim brothers*²¹. More and more Algerians are touched by the Spirit, this Breath of love that leads them to join us and make community with us. This requires an entire ministry of accompaniment and formation.

- The third surprise is the diversity of the Church's members, her **universality**. The arrival of priests and religious from Sub-Saharan Africa, from Latin America, from Asia, and even the arrival of an Arab bishop (Jordan) change the vision of the mission. The advantage is that the constant mix between Christians and Westerners is questioned. The Church is no longer French! The other side of this richness is that these new players no longer know or know poorly the Church's history, its various passages, and its way of being in this country. They come burdened with their history, their formation, and their way of seeing the mission, which is more in the proclamation, in the fact of being seen than in discretion. That does not happen without tension even within religious communities!

Thus the Church is invited to continue putting out into the deep: to allow herself to be shaken and formed, while affirming her convictions born of her particular journey in the Muslim milieu; and to keep to this double fidelity, on the one hand, to her history, to her ties with the Muslim people, which is the people into which and for which she is sent, and on the other hand, to these new groups who are awaiting formation and more ordinary pastoral ministry!

It must be noted too what the grace of our Church in the reality of her small number, in the midst of the Muslim people, effectuates in the heart of this "new laity", who are finding again the way to the Church, rediscovering the Gospel, reawakening the faith that was more or less asleep or that was settled, bringing it out of monotony, and which commits itself again, putting itself at the service of Christians and the local population. What shakes them up is that this Church is close to the people, formed in small communities all well integrated in this country, where mutual understanding is attainable. The Church seems to be like the yeast in the world's dough. She awak-

²¹ Jean Toussaint in a talk in Tunis for a meeting of major superiors in 2009.

ens hearts to another dimension: that of faith, of charity and that is the road to hope.

To put out into the deep, into deep water is risky but promising. There are difficult passages to experience, but which open to a surprising richness. The Spirit, this Breath of love, really guides the Church and has her discover the place which is hers: planted in the midst of a people to whom she must witness to the merciful tenderness of the Father. This was Jesus Christ’s work in coming to take his place in the heart of this world.

To conclude, I give the floor to three witnesses: a bishop, a monk, and an Algerian.

- *“The communion that Jesus announces is a communion that excludes no one. The Eucharist we celebrate is the announcement of God’s universal love, and our life must express this communion, which is only carried out by the Paschal journey of death and resurrection. But each time we celebrate the Eucharist, we gather together all these confused, indistinct, obscure calls of people and we announce in advance the date, the day when there will be a universal banquet to which all peoples will be invited”*²².
- *“My death will, of course, seem to vindicate those who hastily called me naive or idealistic: ‘Let him say now what he thinks of it!’ But they must know that I will finally be freed of my most burning curiosity and will be able, God willing, to immerse my gaze into the Father’s in order to contemplate with him all his children of Islam as he sees them, completely illuminated with the glory of Christ, the fruits of his Passion, invested by the gift of the Spirit whose secret joy will be ever to establish communion and to refashion the likeness while playing with the differences”*²³.
- I end with this friend of the Church: *“There is a ‘Muslim church’ in Algeria. She is made up of all the women and all the men who recognize themselves in the message of universal Love and its commitment to a pluralistic and fraternal society: she is more numerous than you think [...] thank you to the Church for having left her door open: she discovers a new people. And together, we discover God, because God is not a private property”*.

Translated by Sister ANN MARY DOUGHERTY, DC

²² MARTINE DE SAUTO, *op. cit.*

²³ Spiritual testament of Christian de Chergé, 1 December 1993 - 1 January 1994.