

Bishop Pierre Claverie of Algeria: Patron for the dialogue of cultures

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 26, 2007 All Things Catholic

A perennial temptation with saints, whether of the formally canonized variety or not, is to reduce their lives to bumper stickers. Thus Mother Teresa becomes a feel-good symbol for care of the poor and sick, Oscar Romero an icon of liberation theology, and Josemar'a Escrivá the face of traditional, militant Catholicism. While each of those sound-bites may capture something, none does justice to the complex figures to whom they have become attached.

In many ways, the late Bishop Pierre Claverie of Oran, Algeria, who was assassinated in 1996, and whose cause for sainthood recently opened along with 18 other martyrs of a bloody civil war that left 150,000 Algerians dead, could be a prime candidate for just such a simplification.

Claverie's death was part of the carnage created by the Islamic Salvation Front, a template for radical Islamic movements elsewhere. In that context, Claverie could seem a symbol for Christian martyrdom at the hands of jihadists, a patron saint for Catholic hawks in the "clash of civilizations." This was a man, after all, fully aware of the peril that stalked him, who refused to walk away, saying, "I cannot abandon Algeria to the Islamists."

On the other hand, Claverie was also a man of dialogue down to his bones; at his funeral in 1996, Algerian Muslim mourners described him as "the bishop of the Muslims too." Hence the doves could also stake a claim to his memory, as a sort of spiritual antipode to Islamophobia and the "war on terrorism."

Fortunately, we have a firebreak against such reductionist readings of Claverie's life and death: the powerful new biography *A Life Poured Out*, written by Fr. Jean-Jacques Pérennès, a personal friend of Claverie as well as a fellow Dominican. The book has already been published in French and Arabic, and is now available in English from Orbis.

In a time when discussion of Christian/Muslim relations is dominated by ideology and abstract theological debate, Claverie represents an utterly different path: a life lived as a "guest in the house of Islam," not blind to the challenges and never fuzzy about his Christian identity, but relentless in his commitment to friendship. Claverie's interest was what he called the "real, living Islam," meaning people rather than theories.

Reading Pérennès' account, Claverie's legacy seems to come down to this: Only from the outside can Islam seem dominated by militants on the one hand, and Western-style progressives on the other who carry little weight in the street. For those who know Islamic societies, like Claverie, it's those in between who matter:

mainstream scholars, journalists, professional groups, women's groups, ordinary parents and workers -- many devout, even traditional, Muslims, but also people of deep civility. Beyond the trauma of the present, it is with this popular Islam that hope lies, and few Catholic figures of the 20th century knew this world better, or loved it more, than Pierre Claverie.

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Claverie was born in 1938 into a family of *pieds-noirs*, meaning French settlers in Algeria. His family had been in the country for four generations, so he felt himself fully Algerian. The greatest discovery of his life came in his 20s, when he realized that he had been living in what he called a "colonial bubble" -- the majority Arabs had been essentially invisible to him, serving only as backdrop, as local color. He was dismayed that his Christian upbringing had never challenged him to step out of that bubble, to see the Arabs too as his "neighbor."

For the rest of his life, Claverie dedicated himself to overcoming what he called "the abyss that separates us."

As a young Dominican, Claverie studied at the order's famed Le Saulchoir house of studies outside Paris from 1959 to 1967, where he encountered the work of towering French Dominican thinkers of his day such as Marie-Dominique Chenu and Yves Congar. Unlike other young priests of his generation, however, Claverie was never swept up in the revolutionary currents that would crest in the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and later in the tumult of 1968. Instead, he was preparing what he would later call his "Algerian vocation." Claverie mastered Arabic, and while he was always a pastor rather than an academic, he also acquired a deep understanding of Islamic spirituality and history.

When he returned to Algeria in 1967, the Catholic community was in many ways a shell of its former self. Most of the *pieds-noirs* had gone into exile in France, leaving the Catholic population dramatically reduced. In that context, Claverie and other Catholic leaders were forced to articulate a new logic for the church's presence in an Islamic society. The option he embraced might best be described as an "apostolate of friendship."

"One of my principal missions in Algeria," he said, "is to establish, develop, and enrich a relationship, always, everywhere, and with everyone." Claverie's faith was that basic human solidarity would ultimately prove more powerful than theological divisions or historical resentments.

"I know enough Muslim friends who are also my brothers to think that Islam knows how to be tolerant, fraternal," Claverie said. "Dialogue is a work to which we must return without pause: it alone lets us disarm the fanaticism, both our own and that of the other."

Claverie was never one for fashionable, politically correct forms of inter-religious dialogue. He shunned large-scale Christian/Muslim meetings, feeling that the slogans such encounters tend to generate, such as that we are all "children of Abraham" and "people of the Book," or that we all believe in the "one God," artificially gloss over deep theological and spiritual differences.

Claverie was certainly no Pollyanna when it came to the reality of the Islamist threat, frequently denouncing

"the cowardice of those who kill in the shadows." His clear-eyed assessment led him into conflict with the Community of Sant'Egidio, an international Catholic movement known for its efforts in conflict resolution. In the mid-1990s, Sant'Egidio sponsored a "Rome Platform" for dialogue among the warring Algerian parties, including the extremists. Claverie and the other Algerian bishops felt betrayed, arguing that the negotiations lent legitimacy to forces butchering anyone who stood up for a non-Islamist state. They also struggled to explain to democratic activists in Algeria, who were laying down their lives to resist the Islamists, that the Sant'Egidio initiative did not represent the official position of the Catholic church.

Yet for all that, Claverie staked his life on two convictions: first, that a democratic, tolerant Islamic society is possible; second, that it's better to build up alternatives than to tear down what he opposed. He worked tirelessly to foster a genuine civil society in Algeria, creating libraries for students and researchers, rehabilitation centers for the handicapped, and centers for educating women. He would not permit "our love to be extinguished despite the fury in our hearts, desiring peace and building it up in tiny steps, refusing to join the chorus of howls, and remaining free while yet in chains."

Claverie understood the peril such a choice implied.

"Reconciliation is not a simple affair," he wrote in 1995. "It comes at a high price. It can also involve, as it did for Jesus, being torn apart between irreconcilable opposites. An Islamist and a *kafir* (infidel) cannot be reconciled. So, then, what's the choice? Well, Jesus does not choose. He says, in effect, 'I love you all,' and he dies."

Those words proved chillingly prophetic. Claverie was killed on Aug. 1, 1996, just two months after the brutal beheading of seven Trappist monks in Tibhirine, Algeria. He died alongside his Muslim friend and driver, Mohamed Bouchikhi, when a bomb exploded in the bishop's residence. As the two men lay dying, their blood mingled on the floor, offering a metaphor for their common humanity running deeper than differences of ethnicity, ideology and creed.

In the end, Claverie offers an antidote to facile theories about Islam, of whatever sort, crafted at a distance. He was an artisan of the patient, and often painful, work of building relationships, overcoming stereotypes, and confronting painful truths with both honesty and hope.

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On Monday, I sat down at the Dominican's Friary of St. Vincent Ferrer in New York for a conversation with Pérennès, who was in the country both to promote his book and to visit Claverie's sister, Anne-Marie Gustavson, who lives in Highstown, New Jersey, with her American husband. The full text of the interview can be found in the Special Documents section of NCRonline.org [1]. The following are excerpts.

If you could put in just a few words what we can learn about Christian/Muslim relations from the life of Bishop Pierre Claverie, what is it?

I think the message is that to meet the other, to reach the other, you first have to get out of your own closed world. All of us, Christians and Muslims as well, must do this. Then, we must be able to deal with the otherness

of the other. Often we are looking for what is like us in the other. We have to enjoy the difference, which means having fun, taking pleasure in difference. I think Pierre in some ways did that quite well.

He had a quite personal vision of inter-religious dialogue. He was not so involved in the big events that took place after Vatican II, the great Muslim/Christian conferences in Tripoli and Tunis and so on. He thought they were often empty words, saying that we are all the "sons of Abraham." He said no, our history is a difficult one, is a wounded one. ? We have to try to heal these wounded memories.

In 1963, Pope John XXIII received Alexi Adjubei, the son-in-law of Soviet Premier Nikita Krushchev. A story is told about that encounter that may be apocryphal, but it nonetheless makes a point. Supposedly Adjubei was surprised by the pope's warmth and said, "But Holy Father, we have such different ideas," to which John XXIII is said to have responded, "What are ideas among friends?" I have the sense that, to some extent, that also captured the spirit of Claverie.

Exactly. Pierre used to say that if you build friendship with somebody, it doesn't matter if you disagree at some stage. He was very Mediterranean. He had a great gift for friendship, for enjoying parties and being with people. He was quite social. Through this way, he was able to have really wonderful contacts, even with some traditional Muslims.

So is the point that friendships must come before formal theological exchanges?

Yes, because if you start with formal theological exchanges, you come very quickly to big, difficult problems. We will argue about the Trinity and other matters, which requires a lot of skills, reflection, and preparation to deal with it well. But if you start at the human level, it's different. Often Claverie would say, 'We don't have the words for dialogue yet.' So, let's start first by living together, addressing together common challenges. This is what he tried to do in his diocese, as in the other dioceses in Algeria. The aim was to build what he called 'platforms of encounter,' meaning places where people can work together on human rights, women's issues, and so on. Then you feel that you are all human beings, you come closer to each other. It will take a lot of time to really have a theological discussion.

Do you believe Claverie was killed *in odium fidei*?

Not directly. I don't think he was killed directly *in odium fidei*. But he was killed because the message he was carrying, which is an evangelical message, was so different from the mainstream. When you say 'I'm ready to give my life,' this comes from the gospel.

In your mind, is he a martyr?

Certainly. It's very clear. If you read the last texts he wrote, he knew perfectly well that he was going to be killed, and he didn't refuse this possibility. I know people with whom he talked about it.

What would he say?

He said, 'I don't know when it will happen, but I have to be there, I have to fulfill my mission.'

Are the 19 Catholic martyrs of Algeria, in a way, representatives of a much larger group of people who have given their lives?

I would say that. When Pierre was installed as bishop in Oran in 1981, we were a lot of Christians and few Muslims. When he was buried, the Muslims were the majority. Last year, in June 1996, we organized a kind of commemoration of the 10th anniversary of his death. There were 400 people over two days, mainly Muslims. For me, this is the evidence that his message is getting through. The group included young people who never met him, but they told us, 'We have heard of him and want to know who he was.' This to me shows that his choice was the right one, to be courageous until the end, like Jesus did. On the way to Jerusalem, he knew what was going to happen. His disciples said, 'We are scared, you shouldn't go.' Just as I said to Pierre, 'You should protect yourself.' This was a choice he shared with many Algerians, Christian and Muslim.

The fundamental problem with Sant'Egidio's Rome Platform, as Claverie and the other bishops saw it, was including the Islamic Salvation Front without any conditions, such as renouncing violence?

Exactly. They were not asked at the beginning to reject violence, as a preamble to negotiations. But the FLN was also a problem. [The National Liberation Front, which has been the dominant force in Algeria since the era of the anti-colonialist movement in the late 1950s and early 1960s.] The Rome Platform focused on these two fronts, the FIS and the FLN. The bishops' friends were the people in between, people at the grassroots, small parties, people building democracy. If you play this game [with the two fronts], you forget everyone else. It's like Bush and bin-Laden, the one responding to the other. In between there are many people who trying to live together in another way. The democratic movements in Algeria were very upset with this conference taking place.

Are there any broader lessons from the life and witness of Bishop Claverie that can help the church in trying to frame the moral context for a proper response to terrorism?

I think his answer is that often we think there is no alternative to violence and conflict. I think his life is a way of saying, there is an alternative, there are other ways. You have to find them, maybe you have to build them, you have to build these bridges, but they do exist. Don't be naïve, but don't become trapped between these two alternatives -- resignation or violence. Build together other paths, other ways.

Among his Arab friends, are their people whose hearts and minds were really changed by Claverie?

Definitely. When we had this meeting last year, it was amazing to see how many people were thinking of him, showing us the letters they got from him. ? I met an Algerian economist, for example. At the celebration, we had a spiritual evening. We couldn't say that it was a religious event, but it was a spiritual evening in the basement of the cathedral where he's buried. We had two choirs, one a Sufi group from Algeria and another of black African students from Taizé. They sung in Arabic and French, and there were also pictures of Claverie and readings from his texts. At the end, we all went with candles to Pierre's tomb. I found myself with a very famous Algerian economist, a Muslim. I asked him, 'What are you doing here?' He said that, 'Pierre is not only yours. He was the bishop of Oran, of all of us.'

How did Claverie feel about prayer with Muslims? Would he do it?

I don't think so, because in dialogue you have to have clear identities. I don't think he would be a man to say, 'We can mix everything.' He would say, 'I respect their prayer, they pray for me and I pray for them, but each of us has our own tradition.'

You tell a story in your book about a Muslim who was visiting Claverie, who said he had to leave in order to make it home in time to say his prayers. Claverie insisted that he stay, telling him that he could say his prayers in the bishop's house

He even told him, 'It is an honor for me today that you are praying in my home.' He was not praying with him, but he was acknowledging the possibility of somebody else having a real prayer before God.

Claverie managed to combine strong identity and radical openness.

He was a unique witness to this.

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