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Easter With the Monks of Tibhirine

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

Happy Easter everyone! I hope and pray that each one of us can be reenergized this Easter season to welcome the nonviolent Jesus' resurrection gift of peace and go forward in faith, hope and love to do new work for peace with justice.

Resurrection means, among other things, having nothing to do with death. As resurrection people, we non-cooperate with Death and the means and metaphors of death, such as war, racism, sexism, corporate greed and nuclear weapons. That means, as resurrection people, we are people of nonviolence, people of peace, people of universal love.

Recently, I saw an extraordinary film which has encouraged me on this journey of resurrection peace. *Of Gods and Men* tells the story of the seven Trappist monks who were kidnapped and beheaded in Tibhirine, Algeria in the Spring of 1996.

I remember those events vividly. The story is profoundly compelling, moving, even suspenseful. But somehow this French film goes beyond that to lead us into their quiet spirit of prayer, peace, and nonviolent love. One critic suggested that it may be the most spiritual movie ever made. I'm inclined to agree. I encourage everyone to see it.

The film takes us to Notre Dame de l'Atlas, the Trappist monastery in Tibhirine, Algeria, an impoverished desert land of some 29 million Muslims. Nine Trappist monks live simply, pray their liturgies, share manual labor, sell honey at the local market, and serve their Muslim neighbors. Their monastery had become known as a safe place of friendship between Muslims and Christians.

As violent rebellion and civil war breaks out in the early 1990s, neighbors are kidnapped and beheaded. By 1993, after two Spanish nuns were assassinated, many religious left. Each week, one thousand people

were killed. By the summer of 1996, as many as 100,000 Algerians may have been killed in the violent Muslim struggle for a more just society.

One of the monks, Brother Luc, a doctor, runs a little clinic in the monastery. He serves whoever shows up, and that means inevitably both wounded rebels and soldiers. The monks soon get death threats. Several want to leave.

"The violence here has not abated," Brother Luc wrote a friend a few weeks before his death. "How can we get out of this mess?... Violence will not cure violence. We can only exist as humans by becoming symbols of love, as manifested in Christ, who, though himself just, submitted himself to injustice."

As the movie unfolds, we join their prayer, discussion and discernment. We witness their brave decision to remain with the people and suffer their fate. Sure enough, that March 27th, seven of them are kidnapped in the middle of the night. Two of them hid under their beds and survived to tell what happened. Two months later, on May 21st, their heads were found. (To this day, it's not exactly clear who killed them.)

This austere, quiet film takes us into the best of monasticism, radical discipleship, interfaith peacemaking and universal love. It really captures the gentle, humble, nonviolent love of these saints and martyrs. The contrast between their peacemaking spirits and the arrogant meanness we see in so many church men today is striking.

The scenes of the monks sitting around a table talking about their fate reminded me of my experience with the Jesuits of El Salvador in 1985. I remember sitting with them at dinner and hearing them speak of staying in El Salvador despite the ongoing death threats they were receiving. Six of them were assassinated in 1989. (I hope someday someone makes a movie about the Jesuit martyrs, but it would be hard to match the quality of filmmaking displayed in *Of Gods and Men*.)

At the heart of the film stands the powerful young prior, Christian de Cherge. He is truly one of the great saints and peacemakers of our time. Born into a prestigious French military family, he served in the French military in Algeria, fell in love with Islam, and decided to become a Trappist monk there in Algeria because it was the most radical way he could imagine to be a Christian. His passion for Muslims, towering intellect, and steadfast nonviolence inspired the monks to love and serve, even to stay no matter what, despite the warnings of friends near and far.

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Throughout the film, we return to their prayerful singing of the Psalms, which underlines the passion they face. At one point, they speak of the Good Shepherd who does not abandon his sheep, and how they are called to do likewise. Later, we watch silently as Christian walks up a rocky hill -- through hundreds of sheep. He has become that rare good shepherd.

After their deaths, friends discovered an open letter written by Christian. It has become one of the great documents of our time. It is featured, along with the details of their story, in the brilliant 2002 book, *The Monks of Tibhirine*, by John W. Kiser (St. Martin's Press).

If the day comes that I am a victim of the terrorism that seems to be engulfing all foreigners living in Algeria, I would like my community, my Church and my family to remember that I have dedicated my life to God and Algeria. My life is not worth more than any other?not less, not more. Nor am I an

innocent child. I have lived long enough to know that I, too, am an accomplice of the evil that seems to prevail in the world around, even that which might lash out blindly at me. If the moment comes, I would hope to have the presence of mind, and the time, to ask for God's pardon and for that of my fellowman, and, at the same time, to pardon in all sincerity he who would attack me.

My death will satisfy my most burning curiosity. At last, I will be able -- if God pleases -- to see the children of Islam as God sees them, illuminated in the glory of Christ, sharing in the gift of God's Passion and of the Spirit, whose secret joy will always be to bring forth our common humanity amidst our differences.

I give thanks to God for this life, completely mine yet completely theirs, too, to God, who wanted it for joy against, and in spite of, all odds. In this Thank You -- which says everything about my life -- I include you, my friends past and present... And to you, too, my friend of the last moment, who will not know what you are doing. Yes, for you, too, I wish this thank you, this "A-Dieu," whose image is in you also, that we may meet in heaven, like happy thieves, if it pleases God, our common Father. Amen! Insha Allah!

Here is a testament of Holy Week and Easter peacemaking. With this letter, his witness, and his life, Christian de Cherge, along with his brother martyrs, shows us how to follow the nonviolent Jesus, how to make peace, how to live in hope -- despite all odds.

He goes beyond the old adage, "Don't just stand there, do something!" He says, "Don't just do something; stand there!" He reverses Dante, even in that circle of war-making hell, and proclaims, "Take on hope, all ye who enter here!"

Even though the film is about a Good Friday martyrdom, its quiet beauty, stunning scenery, and gentle wisdom actually point us to Easter Sunday. Christian and his friends are getting ready for crucifixion but even more, preparing for resurrection. Their peacemaking lives prefigured their heavenly life. They were living as if the good news were good, as if their survival were already guaranteed, as if death did not get the last word, as if they too would share in the resurrection of Jesus, as if eternal life had already begun!

In a stunning climactic scene, they share a meal while Tchaikovsky's "Black Swan" plays loudly in the background. There, in that moment, like in that other unusually spiritual film *Babette's Feast*, we know the victory of resurrection.

These holy witnesses and martyrs invite us this Easter season to live resurrection lives, even right here in our own culture of war and death, the United States of America. They show us how to do it -- through simplicity, gentleness, loving kindness, peaceableness, nonviolence, service, fidelity to the Word, generosity, interfaith dialogue and steadfast compassion. All we have to do is say No to death, and Yes to life.

As we carry on our peacemaking lives, we too witness to the resurrection of the nonviolent Jesus, and prepare ourselves for new life in his reign of peace. It is this active peacemaking which helps us get ready for resurrection. Alleluia!

To hear a new podcast interview with John, go to www.jesusradicals.com. His latest book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), and other recent books, *A Persistent Peace* and *Put Down Your Sword*, as well as Patricia Normile's *John Dear On Peace*, are available from www.amazon.com. To contribute to Catholic Relief Services' Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund, go to: <http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn>. For further information, or to schedule a lecture or retreat, visit:

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