

MONASTIC WISDOM SERIES: NUMBER THIRTY-SEVEN

Christophe Lebreton, OCSO

**Born from the Gaze of God**

*The Tibhirine Journal of a Martyr Monk*

(1993–1996)

MONASTIC WISDOM SERIES

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*The Tibhirine Journal of a Martyr Monk*  
(1993–1996)

Christophe Lebreton, OCSO

Translated by  
Mette Louise Nygård  
and Edith Scholl, OCSO



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*We had accepted within ourselves the sentence of death,  
that we might trust not in ourselves  
but in God who raises the dead. . . .*

*In Him we have put our HOPE.*

(2 Corinthians 1:9-10)

—entry for Thursday, December 15, 1994



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## PREFACE TO THE PRESENT EDITION

by Henri Teissier,  
Archbishop Emeritus of Algiers

In a letter to his parents of February 1992, Brother Christophe wrote: “Yesterday brought me a nice satisfaction. In the vineyard Ali said to me: ‘So, one can really tell you’re beginning to know how to prune.’ To do it well you have to look beyond the branch that’s apparently dead. You have to see the invisible fruit, still to come. This fruit is for everyone, and so we must work together.”<sup>1</sup> All of Christophe’s rich interiority may be found in this brief statement: his fellowship with the Tibhirine farmers that shared the work of the monks in the monastery garden; his humility as apprentice who had to get used to working the land, after arriving in Algeria with his law degree (“you’re beginning to know how”); his knack for passing directly from everyday concerns (“pruning the vine”) to a meditation rooted in his daily reading of the Gospel (“the invisible fruit of the branch”); his desire to work with his neighbors and friends of Tibhirine (“we must work together”); and, finally, his glance turned toward the future (“you have to see the invisible fruit, still to come”).

1. Marie-Dominique Minassian, *Frère Christophe Lebreton, moine de Tibhirine* (Bégrolles-en-Mauges: Éditions de Bellefontaine, 2009), 144. This is the spiritual biography of Brother Christophe, written after conducting a wide survey of his family members and making a thorough study of all the texts available. M.-D. Minassian wrote her doctoral dissertation on the spiritual message of Brother Christophe.

We should add that this text also reveals the poetic density innate to all Christophe's writings, and the very natural spiritual depth that contributes to the richness of his journal and his exchanges with those close to him. We see these qualities present in this other brief statement, taken this time from the journal: "This afternoon Mohammed is inviting Christian and me to have coffee at his house. He's just finished laying down the floor in the foyer of his house and in the bedroom. The future of faith comes to meet us in this shared story" (October 30, 1994). This "shared story" is the very precise and important stage in a young and simple family's life that allows it to leave the ancestral home where life as a couple is being crushed by the preceding generation and numerous assorted relatives. For such a young couple, building their own home means giving themselves the possibility for honest, mutual intimacy and for assuming the responsibility of raising their own children. However, for the spiritual person that Christophe is, this specific event concerning one of the workers associated with the monastery takes its place in the "sacred story" that is being written around the monastery, through the human growth of the neighboring families. For him, this "story" is shared by the monks and their neighbors alike: "The future of faith comes to meet us in this shared story."

In these two little episodes I recognize all the dimensions of Christophe's personality, just as I knew him when I used to go every two or three months to the monastery of Our Lady of Atlas as archbishop of Algiers. I used to go simply to meet with the monks, or to accompany a group making a retreat with them. He was "Tibhirine's gardener of the moment," and at the same time the youngest of the monks, the most straightforward of them, but also the poet and true man of the spirit among them, as the journal shows. I had the opportunity to chat with him when he showed us his garden or introduced us to his Algerian associates. I would also meet him in chapter, to which Prior Christian invited me each time I was traveling through, or in the personal interviews that Father Christian asked me to have with each of the monks at those moments when the community was going through its gravest trials. I also had occasion to admire his spiri-

tual message when, at my request, he held a day of recollection for the bishops of North Africa, of whose conference I was then president. But I have to admit it was when I discovered his journal that I truly came to appreciate—and with great emotion—the depth of his interior dialogue with the Lord, a dialogue that was always marked by his attention to the persons and events surrounding him, as well as to the persons and events of our Church and of Algeria. This is the reason why I am very grateful to Éditions Bayard for taking the initiative of this new edition so as to put at the disposal of a greater public the message of Brother Christophe.



As the situation started getting more serious around the monastery and in Algeria at large, the reflections Christophe entrusted to his journal likewise reached an even more impressive depth. After a serious incident, when twelve bodies belonging to terrorists were exposed for all to see in the neighboring town of Medea, Christophe notes in his journal: “On his return from Medea, and still shocked by what he had seen, Mohammed said to me: ‘The worst thing is that Muslims did this to Muslims. This is terrible.’” He then adds: “In Rwanda [in this same year of 1994], Christians did it to Christians. Indeed, the faith is being tested, shaken” (August 20, 1994).

This same capacity of making the connection between concrete events and their spiritual references made him reflect as follows on another dramatic incident in 1994: “To drink the blood of the Lamb places us in one camp: that of the victims. Our young neighbor, Ben Yussef Zubir, died yesterday, because an army truck hit the car he was in. An innocent victim joined to you, our paschal Lamb. I should like to intervene, to stand in the breach and try and stop these killings that go on every day. It must be done by a truer, more total form of engagement, in prayer” (October 11, 1994). Here he connects an event, the death of a neighbor, to the biblical reference that gives it meaning: “the paschal Lamb.” On

the situation of the monastery, caught between the army and the terrorists, he ponders thus: "Perhaps it's not enough to say that we don't have to choose between the powers that be and the terrorists. In fact, every day we have to make the concrete choice of those Jean-Pierre calls 'the little people'" (March 14, 1995).



All the friends of the monastery at Tibhirine are grateful to the scriptwriters and actors of the film *Of Gods and Men* for having given a great public access to the monastic life of the Tibhirine community—its prayer, its daily work, its fraternal bonds, and its relations with the surrounding Muslim world. Some of the actors, like Michael Lonsdale in the role of Brother Luc, succeeded wonderfully in entering into the life of the monk they incarnated. We think also of Jacques Herlin in the role of Father Amédée, one of the two survivors, now deceased. Nevertheless, in order to bring out the dramatic character of the decision taken by the monks to remain faithful, the director chose to depict a marked tension within the community between those who, like the prior, Christian de Chergé, embrace the risk incurred, and those among the monks who hesitate before such a difficult choice. The film thus shows Brother Christophe as the one who had the greatest difficulty in embracing the grave risk the community is running, and the possibility of martyrdom.

This is not what I recollect from my dealings with Brother Christophe and the monastery. Naturally, they had to make a difficult decision. But they weren't the only ones to do so. We should recall the context. The whole of Algerian society and the Algerian Church were living under this threat. Christophe's journal enables us to enter into the spiritual atmosphere that accompanied the monks' decisions. I myself can attest to this interior attitude, since at Father Christian's request I twice met with each of the brothers. I did not feel in them the anxiety the film portrays. To be convinced of it we have only to recall the following reflection from Christophe's journal in 1995, after the violence had

already taken a toll of eight of our brothers and sisters, both religious and priests: "I don't think anyone among us is much concerned with his own life. This greatly clears the way before us as a community!" (August 23, 1995).

All of Christophe's very numerous references to the Paschal Mystery in the journal go in the same direction. Witness this text of August 1994: "The mail hardly ever arrives here any more. The bridge has been blown up. The forest is burning. There is no water and it is hot and then here, you know, killing happens here a lot. A glance at history shows that failure obviously dominates, unless from your cross your hand writes in us, in me too, illegible love" (August 4, 1994). Such spiritual realism is applied by Christophe also to the celebration of the Eucharist as "sacrifice of the cross": "What makes the liturgy is the paschal event. This didn't occur in church but on a cross that had nothing liturgical about it. What was involved was a murder and the blood of an innocent man and his tortured body. I await for adoration in spirit and truth." Already in 1993, two days before the first visit of the terrorists to the monastery, Christophe wrote: "The impossible resolution, yes, I have made it: received from You. Love obliges me: This is my body: given. This is my blood: poured out. May it be done unto me according to your word, may your gesture pierce me through. And this resolution—that is yours: it's infinitely beyond me. A resolution stronger than death" (December 22, 1993).



We should also take into account another evolution in Christophe's life. It's clear that, ever since his arrival in Tibhirine, he became involved in very rich daily relations with his Muslim neighbors, especially those who worked in the garden with him. But it's quite surprising to discover that it was only in 1994 that he wanted to join the monastery's Muslim-Christian prayer group (the *Ribât es-salâm*<sup>2</sup>). He will do so as a particular response to the

2. "Bond of peace."

death of Marist brother Henri Vergès, assassinated in the Kasbah on May 8, 1994. This brother, a profoundly spiritual person, was a member of the Ribât. Impressed by his death and his message of life, Christophe on this occasion petitions the prayer group as follows: “I sense something like a secret appeal from Henri [Vergès] to come join you in this kind of mission-presence. I am attracted not by ideas or by a system but by the place of the Ribât such as Henri lived it. To be sowers of love just where we are.”<sup>3</sup>

Christophe is not interested in an “Islamic-Christian dialogue” that would be nothing more than an abstract encounter, cut off from everyday life. He often refers to his encounter with his Muslim neighbors, but on another register. He wanted to live a spiritual life that embraced his Muslim friends rather than engage in any heady discussion on the two confessions. This is, for example, what he wrote in his journal in 1994: “In the house of Islam—in the present state of its Algerian structuring (!)—it’s probably not opportune to present oneself as the house across the street—structured differently. It’s better to be the Body of your Presence resolutely and simply, to be simply there in a relation of love, vulnerable, exposed” (March 20, 1994). And again: “Our Gospel mission: to live the Good News of our relation with Muslims. Today we’re going to work in the vineyard: You, planted here in this land of Algeria; you: bear in us fruits of friendship” (March 29, 1994).



With Christophe’s journal we have in our hands the day-by-day report of the events that marked the Tibhirine community from August 1993 (four months before the first visit to the monastery by the terrorists) until March 19, 1996 (seven days before their abduction). This testimony is given us by a deeply spiritual person who was also a poet. Christophe was the youngest monk in the community. He touches us as much by the sincerity of his

3. Minassian, *Frère Christophe*, 214.

Christian confession as by the expressive quality and depth of his monastic and spiritual life. He touches us also by the very concrete color of his “confessions.” I venture the word because they remind me of the confidences that Saint Augustine recorded fifteen centuries earlier, precisely here in Algeria.

The famous “Testament” of Father Christian de Chergé will abide as one of the great spiritual texts of the twentieth century. In it he expresses himself both in his own name and in that of his community. Brother Christophe’s journal brings us a witness of the same proportions. For almost three years Christophe connects his personal testimony to the concrete events of his own community, of his region (Tibhirine and Medea), of the Church of Algeria and of Algeria itself. All who were touched by the tokens of fidelity given in the film *Of Gods and Men* will find in Christophe’s journal an overwhelming testimony of what one of the monks of the community was living through during this period. “I am like everyone here and like our neighbors: tired, weighed down. Indeed, the story of men is a grave thing. The work of God is the true labor of a monk. I love performing it here. This place is holy. A place of true adoration in the Breath of the Nazarene.” These lines were written on January 2, 1994, one week after the first forced entry by the terrorists into the monastery.

*Tlemcen, Algeria  
September 22, 2011*



# A LONG LOVE POEM

## PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

by Dom Armand Veilleux

*"I love you."* These words, underlined, ring out like a refrain throughout Brother Christophe Lebreton's journal. In the purest Cistercian tradition, Christophe is madly in love with God. After all, have not several twelfth-century Cistercian Fathers left us commentaries on the Song of Songs? That "I love you" broke forth from him one day while he was studying in Tours, like a cry that came from the very depths of his being. It transformed his life completely. That cry, which in turn became poetry and music, remained in him until his last breath.

In him, that mad love for God was neither romanticism nor rootless energy. He was embedded in everyday monastic life, with its sometimes prosaic challenges, in his contacts with brothers and neighbors, in his intimate relationship with his family and his friends in Algeria and elsewhere. He called this journal a "prayer notebook." It begins on August 8, 1993, a few months before twelve Croatian workers were assassinated at Tamesguida, near his monastery at Tibhirine, and stops with the entry of March 19, 1996, a few days before the seven brothers at Tibhirine were abducted. It allows us to follow what not only Christophe but the whole community of Tibhirine lived through day by day, during this period that was so full of tragic events.

Christophe came from a wonderful family. His journal reveals a beautiful relationship with each member of his family. Toward the end of this period his father died, a few months

before the drama at Tibhirine. He arrived at his father's deathbed just before he died, and wrote with great respect in his journal the words that his father confided to his mother before he died: "Tell Christophe that I have doubted much and yet always believed." Christophe recognizes himself in this demanding faith. Had he not written the following prayer a year before? "Facing death, tell me—Love—that my faith will be steadfast. Suddenly, I am terrified of believing" (December 1, 1994).

While the infernal circle of death is tightening around them, the monks of Tibhirine grow together in a union with God that is comparable only to their fraternal union. Mutual understanding did not go without saying in such a gathering of strong temperaments. Christophe himself has problems overcoming his aggressiveness; in choir, where he is often cantor, the spontaneous prayer that he sometimes blurts out is: "I'm fed up with the office!" It is also moving to read from his pen gems like the following: "In chapter yesterday morning, a very soft light shone about us: we were 'all gaze' listening to one another, listening to you" (March 13, 1995); or: "I don't think anyone among us is much concerned with his own life. This greatly clears the way before us as a community!" (August 23, 1995).

The Tibhirine community had gotten rid of the greater part of their large property after Algerian independence, and had afterward worked out a cooperative plan with a few neighbors to exploit the small piece of land that was left. Christophe, who was responsible for this work, was in almost daily contact with the neighbors and was friends with several of them, whose names and reflections grace his journal. Once, when he returns from a journey, he writes, for example: "What a joy to meet Mohammed, Ali and Moussa" (February 12, 1994).

He did not have much knowledge of spoken Arabic or of Islamic studies, but in the story of his friendly relations with the neighbors of the monastery and his workmates, he reveals the ordinary Algeria, the country of "the little people," in all its beauty and freshness, so different from the country of the military and the extremists. In Christophe's dialogue with his workmates, where he collects all their words of wisdom and deep faith, we

have “inter-religious dialogue” in its everyday form, which is the richest and most important.

The nearly three years covered in this journal were years of unheard-of violence in Algeria. From the first pages of the journal, we read: “Assassinations in Algiers. After so many others. This journal cannot remain sheltered from this violence. It pierces me” (August 22, 1993). During the months that follow, Christophe does let himself be pierced by the violence. Notes like that recur again and again like a painful litany. The death of missionaries killed during this period is mentioned every time with great sobriety of words. He had friendly relations with almost everybody. The death of thousands of Algerians, who were victims of the same violence, upsets him just as much, and he is no stranger to the violence in other countries, such as Bosnia, or the slaughter in Hebron.

Like all the other brothers at Tibhirine, he systematically refuses to choose sides with one camp or the other in this mad spiral of violence. He sees the same power of Evil at work in the Islamist terrorist actions as in the bloody reprisals by the forces of order. Refusal of all violence does not mean rejection of those who are violent. Christophe declares his disagreement with a so-called democrat who places herself in the line of the eradicators, and who describes on television her project for a society where there is no room for the other side.

Christophe has great sympathy for Brother Luc, the doctor in the community, who treats whoever is sick or wounded without concern about his or her ideological, political, or military affiliation. The “brothers of the mountain,” as they call the Islamists at Tibhirine, come as well. Christophe notes with a smile how Luc, at the beginning of Holy Week, asks them not to come this week unless, that is, they are very tired (April 10, 1995).

This journal is also a long answer to the question that is often asked: Why did the monks at Tibhirine stay at the heart of this violence? They were certainly not unaware of the dangers. More than once they asked themselves the question, explicitly and in community: should they stay or not? To remain seemed to them a demand of fidelity, to God first of all and to their vocation, but

also to the people of Algeria, and to the Algerians at Tibhirine in particular. The solidarity that they had knit with the little people must not be betrayed. When Moussa says to Father Christian, the prior: "If you leave, you deprive us of your hope, and you take away from us our hope" (January 4, 1994), or when Mohammed repeats to Christophe: "You still have a small gate that you can escape through. For us there is no road, no gate!," Christophe writes in the journal: "It is a question of defending far more than a monastery. The mission to the people who suffer opens wide its house of prayer" (December 29, 1993).

To stay is a decision that the brothers of Tibhirine have taken knowingly, and Christophe is openly annoyed when he gets the impression that certain church authorities want to make that decision for them. "Are you also going to leave us?" is the question repeated by their neighbors there and then, making the same question from Jesus to his disciples echo in their hearts.

Christophe even becomes a little sarcastic when the papal nuncio tries to organize a transfer of the monks to the nunciature. The monks cannot imagine staying anywhere except at Tibhirine, and their neighbors cannot imagine them elsewhere either. "I am not here to defend Christian ideas, an ideological truth that can so easily be exclusive. What remains for us is the freedom of hostages: not the freedom to escape, but the freedom of the person that goes further, breaking through the imprisonment imposed by all violences" (March 23, 1994).

Is this a desire for martyrdom? No. Christophe loved life and wanted to live. That is why the daily contact with the death of persons that were dear to him, and with his own death, which became a steadily more realistic possibility, created no unhealthy desire for death, nor a proud desire for martyrdom.

At the same time, as death gradually becomes less improbable, it is accepted. He loves to quote the lapidary phrases of old Brother Luc, wise and grumbling, who says: "I don't give a damn about death, and I am not afraid of either the terrorists or the police" (March 24, 1994); but who also says at the prayer of the faithful: "Lord, give us the grace to die without hatred in our heart" (December 31, 1993).

Shortly after the Croats were abducted, the monks agreed about a scenario in case of attack: if they were all together at the moment of an attack, they were to stay together. If, on the other hand, the attackers came while the monks were scattered around the monastery, each one was to save himself as best he could. That is why, when six “brothers of the mountain” arrived on Christmas Eve in 1993, Christophe and another brother hid in an empty vat in the cellar of the monastery. There they spent several hours, convinced that they were the only survivors; but then they discovered that their brothers were alive and well, chanting Vigils of Christmas. That event was decisive for Christophe’s spiritual development. It was, literally, a descent into death, and a rebirth. It was not easy for him to overcome a feeling of guilt, and a certain anxiety that he had been a coward. But it was also a school of humility that opened him to a greater love of Christ and his brothers, and an ever greater freedom in the face of the death that might come.

He crosses another stage in self-giving when he writes, at the end of 1994: “Oh, if dying could stop and prevent the death of so many others, then I would gladly say with pleasure: Yes, I volunteer” (December 30, 1994). And about a month before their abduction, after having planted a cross in the garden, a gift from one of the last missionaries to be killed, he wrote: “When will it be the hour to be sown—beloved in you—at Tibhirine?” (February 19, 1996).

The last few lines of the journal were written on March 19, 1996, feast of Saint Joseph, but also the anniversary of his consecration to Mary, whom he loved with great tenderness. The last words he wrote were: “I shall walk with a perfect heart.” A few days later, the final march toward captivity and death began. His last poem was written in his blood, mingled with that of the Lamb. It is his uninterrupted “*I love you.*”

ARMAND VEILLEUX, ABBOT  
Our Lady of Scourmont

*Chimay, Belgium*  
*January 26, 1999*



## FOREWORD TO THE FIRST EDITION

by Father Jean-Pierre Schumacher<sup>1</sup>

Brother Christophe's sermons, as well as his poems, had an attraction that was peculiarly their own, appealing by turns to sensibility, imagery, and feelings. We find the same personal traits in his journal of the period between August 8, 1993, and March 19, 1996, which were the last years of our common life at Tibhirine, before the drama that brutally interrupted it on the night between 26 and 27 March 1996.

Christophe has a way of presenting everyday facts that is not dull, neutral, or cold. His narrative is alive; it contains a soul—his own. He tells of things the way he lives them, sees them, and feels them. That is so true that often his writing allows realities to emerge from the depths of his being, giving glimpses of his faith, of his generosity in gift of self, of his attention to God present in all beings and events, of his hope open to the Kingdom, still to come and yet already at work in the humble realities of the present moment and even more beautiful in what may be sensed in the chiaroscuro of faith. Sometimes there emerges with intensity (why not say it?) his passionate love for the Lord and Algeria, to which he dedicated his life. Noticeable also is his concern for the little ones, his suffering in the face of the evil gnawing at social life and sowing so much misery among men. He feels inadequate, but not desperate. Sometimes the intimate

1. Father Jean-Pierre, prior of Our Lady of Atlas after Father Christian, is one of two monks, the other being Father Amédée, who survived the abduction and murder of the seven brothers.

drama that confronted us as community during that period emerges between the lines.

Perhaps one might say that this journal allows the reader to slip into Christophe's manner of contemplating persons and events. No doubt the resulting awareness is more precious and, at bottom, more exact than what would come from an observer who, looking at things from the outside, might make a presentation that would certainly be objective, but also neutral and cold. There is a dimension of warmth and humanity here that stems from a member of the community, one of the flowers of the many-colored bouquet that made it up. In this journal, written with fidelity and care, we are given precise and concrete everyday details that are invaluable when recalling this last segment of the community's history. This journal has another advantage, which is that it discretely reveals the interior of the life of one applying himself, like a diligent and interested pupil, to write in living letters the great history that is written by the very hand of the Master of History. Christophe describes this task in the following terms: "To join words together is real work. It seems to me that I've been hired to do something else: to join the world to you by means of words passing through me. So: when shall I be able to write in all truth the word that Algeria, that all men so severely lack: MERCY?" (09/01/1993).

FATHER JEAN-PIERRE SCHUMACHER  
Titular Prior of Our Lady of Atlas

*Fez, Morocco*  
*November 26, 1998*

## PRESENTATION

This journal of 1993 to 1996 is made up of a notebook, and in addition a handful of loose sheets written during Brother Christophe's stay in Fez during May and June of 1995. The other texts he wrote during this period, in particular his homilies and the daybook of the community during Father Christian's absences, are not a part of the journal.

Brother Christophe loved to add little designs to certain pages of his journal. Thus, for instance, in the phrase *I love you* the word "love" is almost always replaced by a . Besides the heart, we have retained a dozen or so other designs, less frequently used, that appear in the journal and illustrate a text or actually replace it, such as  or . As far as possible, too, we have tried to reproduce the graphic originality of the text in its punctuation, spelling, and syntax.

We have left unaltered all quotations and references to books given by Brother Christophe. Passages written in Arabic or Italian have been translated.

At the end of the book, following the journal, we have included a section of unpublished texts from the pen of Brother Christophe (poems, messages to friends, letters), as well as photos that trace his life's itinerary, from early childhood to his life with his brother monks at Tibhirine.

The Atlas community that emerges in this portion of the journal was made up of Father Christian, Brother Luc, Father Amédée, Father Jean-Pierre, Brother Michel, Brother Paul, Brother Célestin, and Brother Christophe, to which should be added the monks residing at Fez in Morocco: Father Bruno, Father Jean-Baptiste, Father John of the Cross, and Father Guy. All of these

monks are referred to by the titles of either “brother” or “father,” the latter especially in the case of the elders, but in general Brother Christopher simply prefers to call them by their first name.

# **Tibhirine Journal**

1993–1996



## 1993

This nice notebook, left on my schoolboy's desk on the feast of Saint Christopher, invites me to come, gives me a sign to write inside its enclosure. Without betraying the silence of its pages.

One must follow the lines,

listen to what the verticals say

then place the words as they emerge

and develop the sentence

it can move quickly, in a hurry, inspired by a sense that  
orients it

and pulls it beyond the page

toward the words of another

whose assiduous reader

I am

in this place called a scriptorium.

This big notebook: what kind of writing will fill it?

I shall keep it up. I beg you.

To transcribe the gift from day to day

You are the friend

it is you who knock

and ask for shelter

in my home you want to tell

a story

that happens to me

Open up to me you say

my sister

my friend

my dove my perfect one

To write will be  
 to open up to me  
 I opened up to my beloved but turning his back  
 he had disappeared.  
 To write will be  
 to seek  
 writing is the wound of one who is sick with love.

Writing: my soul bursts forth in his Word  
 (A. Chouraqui,<sup>1</sup> Song 5:6)  
 Writing is obedience.  
 In this feast-day book  
 the miracle may happen  
 if I do everything well  
 as the bridegroom says  
 one should do

As servant I shall fill this notebook  
 that it may serve to give joy  
 and a life of covenant.  
 I am held by the sign  
 the writing will be crucified  
 marked by you  
 my king  
 the king  
 it is written

I shall speak my poem for the king  
 my speech will be neither quick nor brilliant  
 with no beauty of appearance

1. André Chouraqui (1917–2007), French-Jewish lawyer and writer, born in Algeria. Translated the entire Bible (both the Jewish and the Christian scriptures) from Hebrew and Greek into French from 1970 onward. By his unique manner of translating, he revolutionized the reading of the Bible in Francophone areas. Brother Christophe follows Chouraqui's translation of the Bible in many of his biblical references, and we have followed this in our English renderings.

the words simply  
look at you  
if you wish  
it will be  
a notebook of prayer  
begun on this Sunday  
August 8, 1993  
at Tibhirine

[08/09/1993] August 9th.

You present the page to me. How can I utter you?  
A great desire devours the words that write themselves: to  
see you.  
This journal gazes on you.  
If it might keep to this one thing necessary  
To write just what has to be said  
To obey the unknown words  
today  
not to close my heart  
to consent to the opening  
that obliges me

[08/10/1993] August 10th.

My writing does not aspire to any synthesis capable of transmitting a message, or ideas. I intend rather to just say it. I am the servant-scribe. I shall obey the law of your mouth.  
To transcribe a kiss. What an adventure. My writing is all stirred up at the thought.  
The one holding my hand  
draws it on beyond words.  
I shall write your silence. Without translating.  
If anyone has ears, let him hear.  
I shall write from above, thus escaping any ambitious project  
I have no ambition,  
I speak softly.

I shall say what comes to me  
 from you  
 and writes itself in me  
 This writing detaches me  
 from the world  
 Who will teach me how to write on earth  
 as it is in heaven?  
 This morning, I only put this down  
 LIFE  
 (The page trembled, the promised page.)

[08/12/1993] Today (August 12, 93 at Tibhirine) I love you.

No, you ask me for no proof. You believe it infinitely.

It remains for me to fill this writing. To be converted today to what is written between us: binding me to you. And it is you who give the shape of love to my existence. Your *I love you* appeared to me one day.

I have not recovered from it.

I stay next to "this well that nothing can empty"

(Jean-Claude Renard).<sup>2</sup>

Emptied out.

On one All Saints' Day I signed on the official sheet your *I love you*.

What takes place here

is a hidden story,

it is a game of love or nothing at all.

[08/15/1993]

To introduce into the grid of this page

woman

that is what comes to me

on this fifteenth of August.

2. Jean-Claude Renard (1922–2002), French poet.

And the writing is invited to greater humility.  
Not to pursue anything. Not to plan anything. Above all  
no soaring.

Can one write simply in a silent consent to the gift?  
Marian writing is existence that corresponds,  
not without anguish, not without pain,  
to the Word that finds shelter here  
house of flesh

The writing would be dwelt in  
not without a certain disturbance to the syntax  
or the spelling

The writing would let you be seen, you who come  
tireless thirsty loving

The writing: heavy like a pregnant woman  
in pain: in labor.

[08/18/1993] The 18th.

It's no trifle to keep a journal. Very tidy? How to do it.

Would you please hold my hand, keeping it from straying  
or leading it back to the straight line?

Grant I may write rightly.

[08/20/1993] The 20th.

I had to prepare a homily. I gave it today. I feel empty: bereft  
of the sense of the words that were pronounced just now with  
persuasion and conviction: "to love" "to pray." They drew  
strength, light and truth not from me but from the Gospel.

But tonight I have lost their taste. They mean nothing to me.

It was you who spoke them. I look out for them on your lips.

Your eyes invite me to the silence where you form them. I  
shall keep silent in you.

For your sake to stop writing and set off for the ineffable.

[08/22/1993] Sunday (August 22nd).

I copy this bit from a scrap of writing I found among some other papers yesterday. I had written:

By your strength body and blood cries tears,

I think I am about to be born.

Before me: openness

That's good.

I have only

to follow

at your risk.

Are these words true today?

I live at your risk.

The Woman is the one

who draws me

into this game

(evening)

Assassinations in Algiers. After so many others.

This journal cannot remain sheltered from this violence. It pierces me.

[08/23/1993] Monday.

Yes. To be your body here exposes us to this violence that is not aimed at us for the moment.

Would it not be better if one person gave himself up for this country?

My servant, you say, shall be there † where I am.

One must really follow you.

Monday evening.

Read this by Marie-Alain Couturier<sup>3</sup> (*La vérité blessée* ["The wounded Truth"], p. 180): "What we are, what is most precious

3. Marie-Alain Couturier, OP (1897–1954), was a French Dominican priest, who gained fame as a designer of stained-glass windows and was noted for his modern inspiration in the field of sacred art.

in what each one of us is, what is most inexpressibly ourselves in what we are, does not depend on us. It is given to us."

Are the words in this journal "for giving away"?

[08/28/93] August 28th.

There is already a feast-day gift in this journal; there is: you.

And then: she has come into it. Oh, I am far from not being present, far from forgetting myself in order to make room; but sometimes I can actually write without (too much) glancing at myself.

Can actually write toward you.

Will you teach me how to write for you,  
for the service of your heart?

Am I in the process of inventing a mission for myself?

The scribe of the cross is a disciple. He is a child. The world is waiting for the words of this childhood. The Liar is lying in wait to devour them, to pervert them as soon as they are born.

I shall write in the desert.

I shall defend your cause. If your breath takes my hand:

I shall obey your language.

[08/29/1993] The 29th.

To hear you telling me to take up my cross makes me realize that to do that I must let go of what occupies (preoccupies) me, let go of all other things.

Must follow you headlong into your freedom.

[09/01/1993] September 1st.

To join words together is real work. It seems to me that I've been hired to do something else: to join the world to you by means of words passing through me. So: when shall I be able to write in all truth the word that Algeria, that all men so severely lack: MERCY?

[09/05/1993] The 5th.

I lack the diligence to keep this journal, whose aim is basically to test my existence as being a word in the process of writing itself here. In order so to utter you.

Christian has gone away for more than a month, leaving me in a more vulnerable position. Like yesterday, when I “refused a permission.” It should only be a matter of defending your will, and thus the freedom of the person who chooses to go through a mediation before engaging in action. W.’s freedom consisted in putting up and thus, I think, taking responsibility.

[09/08/1993] The 8th.

Mulud was in choir yesterday, head crowned with flowers (that he will take off at the end of the office: *Barakha. Aissa. Huyya* [“Blessing. Jesus. She”]).

I was moved to feel his hand holding on to my cowl to keep his balance. We prostrate together for the doxologies, which he manages to get out . . . more or less, but he says *amín* with great conviction at the end.

Father Scotto<sup>4</sup> died yesterday in Valence, far from home, far from his own country. He was here less than a month ago. His last words to me ring true: “I’m happy to have seen you.” As for me, you know: I really long to see you again.

[09/12/1993] The 12th.

Yesterday, poor and empty after listening to him for a long time, I said to D.: “Do you really believe that something of your life has passed over into me?”

Saying this, I said something that commits me way beyond myself: something that commits you in me and crucifies me.

4. Father Jean Scotto, former Catholic bishop of Constantine, born in Algeria 1913, died September 1993.

And to have written this statement shakes me up and attracts me. I hope it is true.

As far as your Spirit wants to take me. On we go. It's

SUNDAY.

If you would only untie my hand  
and loosen completely my detached  
heart, then I could *write you*.

This detachment is at work, taking its time to do everything well in accordance with your cross.

Do you have in mind you some mission  
of love?

[09/18/1993] September 18th.

The destruction of the country continues: attacks, a school  
burnt at Medea.

There is a place for the cross and for a new people to be  
reborn.

The voice of Edith Stein<sup>5</sup> (in the refectory): "The spirit of God is meaning and strength. It gives new life to the soul and makes it capable of realizing things that by nature are beyond it, at the same time showing it a direction for its action. At bottom, any demand full of meaning that penetrates the soul with a strength that engages it, is a word from God. There is no meaning that does not have its eternal origin in the divine Logos. And he who makes haste to embrace such a word at once disposes of the divine strength to conform to it" (p. 66 in *The Power of the Cross*).

Encounters in the guesthouse during the last couple of days. Salima lets me see the Good News in action: giving substance, deep joy, serenity, strength, happiness, freedom.

5. Saint Edith Stein (1891–1942), known in religion as Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, OCD, was a German Jewish philosopher who became a Catholic and later a Discalced Carmelite nun. She was martyred at Auschwitz.

Yesterday we had here a woman psychologist from Paraguay and a psychiatrist, Salim. And Maya, a little child: the Gift glimpsed in the exchange. Were not our hearts burning . . . ?

[09/22/1993] September 22nd.

Salima: to be recognized as a woman, a whole and complete person, by God and by others. I will be baptized, I know it, I feel it.

Childhood and the cross. To be born, and the means to be born. Because it is real, because nothing but Mystery is involved, and because it's only and solely a matter of LIVING: the Woman is there, and some other women.

[09/23/1993] The 23rd.

Salim is back. A long conversation—rather strained—while shelling beans: violence, suffering. God and the religions. “You talk like a fundamentalist.<sup>6</sup> Your references are different. Sometimes I get the impression that you use a language that is not your own . . .,” and then this: “You are tormented.” I said: YES, I have every reason to be. I'd love to be able to say it to you because YOU would have become my life. And that would be understood—simply.

[09/25/1993] The 25th.

Yom Kippur.

Taken together in that boundless gesture  
taken by mad love  
for here one must offer  
a response  
to the violence of the homicidal lie

6. “Fundamentalist” here translates the French word *intégriste*, a somewhat vague but much-used term applied to persons belonging to contemporary ideological-political movements, often reactionary groupings with a religious foundation.

The other cheek—that's my whole body  
lifted up in crucified love  
naked vulnerable strong.

You are winning.

[10/02/1993] October 2nd.

Thérèse of the Child Jesus and of the Holy Face has become very close to me. Her written story speaks to me. Her place of stability is the Cross, after her grace at Christmas: "I resolved to stay there continually . . ." She receives LOVE like a fire, a thirst. "I thirst."

A few days ago, a letter from X. "I shall probably never return to Algeria. Never." X. adds: "A pity, yes, it's even a kind of waste." But I see rather a grace that frees: X. untied to live according to the Gospel.

[10/07/1993] October 7th.

Our Lady of the Rosary and the anniversary of my return to this country: to stay here until you come again. It's to that point we (I) must announce your death, announce your surrendered life.

[10/10/1993] The 10th.

Your will on EARTH. Those words from the prayer received from you spoke to me the other day in the vineyard. To realize the WILL of the Father: to exist by reference to Him, in order to do his work here and now.

War (violence) cross toil: everything is here [in Latin in the text: *Ense, cruce, aratro*<sup>7</sup>].

7. Literally, "by the sword, by the cross, by the plough."

[10/20/1993] October 20th.

I am 43 years old. How much longer to hold out here? Yesterday a journalist, 31 years old, was stabbed. Salim has become very close to me. Friendship and intercession: not so much to pray *for* as to feel my prayer pervaded *by* this brother I've received as a friend. I should like to be his shield, his shelter in distress.

I have to win the battle for PEACE within myself. Receive it from your pierced hands.

Today a letter—after some others—from G. in Lebanon. Overflowing and ardent. A passionate child. And all woman.

I had a doubt. About myself. Have I turned an impulse of the heart away from you to me? Perhaps that would be a blasphemy against Love.

Only you can reassure me. Even so, I must keep close to you: in the same place where the Woman and others with Her are with the beloved Disciple, all turned toward you and receiving Communion from you in crucified Love.

[10/23/1993] The 23rd.

I warn you: I am  
going through you     I go before you and  
I breathe into you the Way  
and oblige you in truth.  
I baptize you with myself on the cross  
GO  
take my *I love you*  
be me

[10/24/1993] The 24th. Sunday.

I warn you  
listen well  
I am  
and look there     yes that is     where I bleed  
for you  
touch who you are

Lectio

With this budding day I receive permission for a paschal  
adventure

Friend what shall we do?

embrace me beloved

and leaving the book I take the opportunity to say

thank you

forgive me

I love you

it is written in your hand

I just have to sign it †

(to the child

of the country. Jean Scotto).

[10/24/1993] October 24, 1993.

If a story

should happen to me

one of these days

having to do with BEING BORN

Friend I beg you finish it

and if it pleases you to make me one day

exit from the NIGHT

You my conqueror

FORGIVE ME

do not let go of me

Then

if I succeed

for once

in loving

if I succeed

in being in time

with your heart

and if, in the END, I receive your

*I love you* †

thank you  
for kindly HAVING MERCY ON ME.

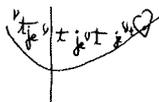
*Ribat es-Salâm*:<sup>8</sup> Watchman, what of the NIGHT?  
“Christianity is the great adventure  
for through it one is called by an infinite love  
that is, by a love that does not cease to ask and to give.”

[11/05/1993] Saturday 5th.

At Lauds (Zechariah 12). Father, here we are a people that rises like the dawn with the Woman standing, receiving the Spirit of prayer: to love and adore.

Nourished yesterday by your Mercy piercing me  
bond of prayer and of the cross with Denis.

To pray for Henri.



[12/01/1993] December 1st.

Ever since Sunday Mass—it was just at the moment of daring to say Our Father

—these words are working me over and take meaning in my body, in this community-body of which I am part: the ALL-POWERFUL GIFT.

[12/02/1993] December 2nd.

Here there is something to see, to receive, in the night: the Gift that is stronger than death. Mary was the first to be pierced

8. “Bond of Peace,” a group that met at Tibhirine engaged in Islamic-Christian dialogue. Father Christian de Chergé was one of its leading lights.

through like Jesus: placed in the axis of that murderous lance that touched her son who was already given over into other hands.

[12/03/1993] December 3rd.

Something in my flesh has taken shape in the form of writing. That is:

The story leads I believe where you know  
and I hope the dénouement is near  
through the all-powerful Gift.

What must happen soon tears me apart.

And what happens to you here pierces me where  
you hold us fast  
with arms outstretched. 

You ask us to be there

(monks) until the end of the story.

Nothing happens on its own. Everything is but  
fulfillment.

And gratitude.

Already ~~✶~~ Christmas is at the door.

Father, it's about you, in me,

it becomes a question of living according to you: all of us  
beloved.

Love one other, says the Child. 

For mercy's sake: Let's go forward! Time is short: hurry!

The story expects your Kiss of peace from us.

[12/05/1993] Sunday, December 5th.

At the homily, I heard: "The role of religious in the Church is one of re-collection."

To collect all that is seen, prayed and done here: this calls for a watchful interiority—that of a friend, a friend of the Bridegroom—and then for a tireless opening outward, without fear or selective withdrawal.

The cross is thus made ready where God and man are recollected.

[12/22/1993] Wednesday, December 22nd.

So we had the community retreat with Father Sanson. What has been retained of the points for self-examination? Has there been etched into me something like a definitive, decisive point having to do with prayer? Yes, a point about adoration that You must have put at the end of a phase that I must live and see through to the end without weakening.

The impossible resolution, yes, I have made it: received from You. Love obliges me:

This is my body: given.

This is my blood: poured out.

May it be done unto me according to your word, may your gesture pierce me through.

And this resolution—that is yours: it's infinitely beyond me.

Near the Woman (you, the Son, born of her flesh, give me permission to call her Mama, and to take her to myself), my resolution is very simple: I am.

A resolution stronger than death.

So we had the retreat, concluded on Friday with a heightened awareness: in the situation facing us, how can we hold firm and what should we do? The effort to use our intelligence (Father Sanson's on this occasion) gives a first indication: seek to understand.

It seems to me that there is a "monastic" way of doing it.

Where prayer intervenes and speaks its particular point of view that is indebted to the Spirit and to Scripture.

Saturday morning I was on the road to Fez, accompanied by A. and M. Staying with the four who are in Fez, happy to be "one of them." A peaceful, restful, consoling time: recollection, fraternal life.

Bernard Rérolle's book on the Beatitudes went with me.<sup>9</sup>

9. Bernard Rérolle, French Marist priest who preached the community retreat at Tibhirine in 1996, one month before the abduction. The book in question is *Passage vers l'autre rive : La dynamique des Béatitudes* ("Crossing to the Other Shore: The Dynamics of the Beatitudes," 1987).

“Onward, the humble of breath, the Kingdom of heaven—of God—is theirs.”

And what follows: to recognize happiness—a way to conversion.

Father Bernardo,<sup>10</sup> in his conference at the closing of the General Chapter, sends us in that direction.

That ought to be enough to keep me occupied . . . until You come again.

. . . here, suddenly, is my happiness, it's true  
my joy: you.

We have been living through various issues here at Tibhirine. Above all: the massacre of the Croats who were working, digging a tunnel, and who lived down there, near us. To hear of it in Fez, and then to live the event that affects us here, is not the same thing.

On my return I find the community deeply marked, affected: deepened in its Christian identity, both human and . . . contemplative.

I must try to integrate in myself what they have lived through.

Like this morning when listening to Ali.

I avoid it too, for it is a question of embracing each brother in his unique way of living his daily life. Reactions of irritation return to me quickly in the face of too many words, or a proud retreat into myself when faced with such a disconcerting and inconvenient attitude. I need to receive the strength to forget myself, at Mary's side—simply: I am.

After Mass.

I am reclaimed by Your resolution: my soul magnifies you. Your resolution is an act of thanksgiving.

Koran II:82: “Those who adhere and are upright are among the Companions in the Garden, they are there forever.”

10. Dom Bernardo Olivera, Trappist abbot general during the years when Father Christophe was writing his journal.

86: "Those who barter the Other in exchange for life in this world."

[12/24/1993] The 24th.

Koran II:87: "Thus we gave the Writing to Moussa [Moses] and we let him be followed by other Messengers. We gave the proofs to Issa [Jesus], son of Mariyam [Mary], sustaining him by an inborn breath. But each time a Messenger brought you what your people did not want, you were puffed up, treating some as liars, and killing others."

More intensely, You pray.  
Rise up!  
Pray so as not to enter the trial.

[12/25/1993] Christmas.

A dark night and the Morning Star lights up every face. We are all alive.

"And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overpowered it."

It is enough for us to hold on to the power  
of becoming children of God  
of God begotten here.

[12/26/1993] The 26th.

What has happened to us?  
You, who are beyond everything  
the Unexpected One revealing our thirst to us: oh come  
"See, I come quickly."  
Caught in the Event,  
we have only to follow the current of grace.  
Unbound, in peace,  
our eyes have seen.

See what is put in the midst of fragile us like the child  
 lying in the manger  
 of us who are vulnerable through and through  
 like the Lamb,  
 and ready like the Servant,  
 see, here is put the SIGN  
 of contradiction  
 and we shall be pierced  
 by the same sword that pierces  
 your heart  
 and the heart of Mary  
 who is our refuge  
 our conscience  
 our open shelter  
 house of prayer  
 for all.

“Christ, in the face of the Father, is the total surrender of self-will; but, for its realization, the will of the Father relied totally on the initiative of the Son.

“In this surrender the Son is completely free, because he is the gift that has consented absolutely. That is what the Father expects of him, but by himself giving up, through love, all power over his Son.

“The powerlessness chosen by the Father as he made his request means that the submission of his Son will never be domination by the Father. The Son must assume the choice of the gift radically alone, and that is how He carries out the will of the Father. When I ask that the will of the Father be carried out, I strive to give birth in myself to the desire to come face-to-face with the Father, in a relationship analogous to that between the Son and the Father. Only the Spirit can guide me on this way of true life” (Guy Coq<sup>11</sup>).

11. Guy Coq, French Catholic philosopher, disciple of Emmanuel Mounier, author of books such as *La Foi, épreuve de la vie* [“Faith the Test of Life”] and *Inscription chrétienne dans une société sécularisée* [“Christian Insertion in a Secularized Society”].

Human—you, my Lord and my God—human until the end,  
 so that I might today enter into your skin  
 walk like you as Son  
 I choose to be loved like you.  
 You breathe into me this impossible choice.

I look at each one of them—my brothers—whom you have  
 chosen. Christian holds your place: “Monsieur Christian” is the  
 password,  
 it’s the Easter word.

[12/27/1993] The 27th. Saint John, the beloved disciple.

“And our communion is with the FATHER  
 and with his SON JESUS CHRIST.”

You, my little children, who are of GOD, you have conquered those  
 prophets,  
 because he who is in your midst is greater  
 than he who is in the world.

“Beloved, if God has loved us so much, †  
 we must have the same love for one another.  
 No one has ever contemplated God.

If we love one another, God dwells in us, and his love is FUL-  
 FILLED in us.

In this we RECOGNIZE that we DWELL in him and he in us,  
 that he has given us his SPIRIT.  
 And we can WITNESS (because we have CONTEMPLATED him)  
 that the FATHER has sent his SON  
 as Savior of the world.

So, to sustain my spirit, I write Scripture: monk-copyist.  
 I lean on the WORD: In the beginning . . .

[12/28/1993] The 28th.

The Common of Martyrs. Tonight we chanted psalm 32.  
Verse 11 woke me up.

“The plan of the Lord remains forever,  
the designs of his heart hold good from age to age.”

And I read what follows with delight: “Happy (onwards!)  
the people whose Lord You are,”  
Beloved Son of the Father, the people in the LOVE that is over us.

Onwards! you poor in spirit.

Yes, you make us run on the way of your commands . . .  
not so easy to understand this well.

We are a body that is all ears.

Yesterday H.T. came sent by you to speak to us. He left leav-  
ing us free to choose the GIFT in communion with the Church.

Oh, how beautiful she is, Jesus—your resplendent Church.

Oh, keep me close to her

in silence and peace,

a child offered.

[12/29/1993] The 29th.

Mohammed: “As for you, you still have a little door you can  
escape through.

But we don’t: no—no road, no door. This is the best corner of the  
*wilaya*,<sup>12</sup> of all of Algeria, and they want to . . .”

It’s a question of defending far more than a monastery.

“The mission to the people who suffer” opens wide the  
house of prayer.

Mohammed is like Simeon in the Temple (when he was  
young!)

this upright and devout man

awaits the CONSOLATION.

12. Arabic administrative unit, in this case a province.

The Church is like the Algerian people: her soul is pierced through by a sword.

[12/30/1993] The 30th.

Anna, the prophetess, adoring night and day  
she praises God  
and speaks of Him—the Child—  
to all those who are awaiting the DELIVERANCE.

Among so many papers to burn, this one attracts my eyes.

It says:

“What is desirable is not the excess of the hero who gets drunk on himself, who in his highest exaltation is more closed in on his pride than ever. Desirable is the excess of the saint who, by detaching himself from himself, climbs the highest peaks to the degree that he descends into the deepest humility.

The GOSPEL has no spirit other than this Spirit of holiness communicated by the Crucified in his last breath” (Bernard Ronze, *Faire la vérité* [“To Do the Truth”], p. 101).

The testimony of Jesus, the Christ-like testimony (Alain  
Chevalier),  
is the breath of prophecy.

[12/31/1993] The 31st.

On this day in 1976, the Day of Ashura,<sup>13</sup> Father Jean-Baptiste spoke of offering the twelfth part of fruits and seeds, and then he spoke about YOUR HAND.

And also: about the day of death as the true [monastic]  
profession.

13. *Ashura*: The Day of Ashura falls on the tenth day of Muharram in the Islamic calendar and marks a very important day of mourning. It is commemorated by Shi’a Muslims as a day of mourning for the martyrdom of Husayn ibn Ali, the grandson of Mohammed.

Into your hands, Mary  
into your hands, Church of Algeria  
I surrender to crucified Love  
that He may profess me  
beloved  
consecrated in your  
*I am*  
Way, Truth, Life.

The Cardinal on the phone yesterday, answering a request  
for advice from Christian:  
persevere in CONSTANCY  
you know one must be firm with those people . . . (+ wisdom:  
rest . . .)

Brother Luc at the Prayer of the Faithful: Lord, give us the  
grace to die without hatred in our heart.