

February 2, 2018, Algeria

They gave their lives for Christ and for the Algerian people and remained faithful to the commitment right up to the violence that disfigured Algeria during the « Black Decade »

(1990s). The entire Catholic Church recognizes the power of the witness they bore, that of a Christian life carried out in the midst of Muslims.

On February 7, 2018, Pope Francis signed the decree of beatification of Bishop Pierre Claverie and his 18 companions. « A life of service for all » « They all died because they chose, by God's grace, to remain faithful to those who in the communities where they served had become their neighbors », wrote the bishops of Algeria in a joint communiqué. « Their death showed that their life was at the service of all: the poor, women in trouble, the handicapped, the young, and all Muslims. A murderous ideology, a distortion of Islam, could not tolerate these others who were different by virtue of their nationality and faith ».

Among these martyrs killed between 1993 and 1996 number the seven Trappist monks of Tibhirine, abducted and assassinated in the spring of of 1996, Most Rev. Pierre Claverie, the for mer bishop of Oran murdered in August of the same year, but also a Marist brother, Henri Vergès, four White Fathers, assassinated at Tizi Ouzou the day after Christmas in 1994 and six religious women from different congregations present in Algeria (Our lady of the Apostles, Missionary Augustinians, the Little Sisters of the Sacred Heart, and the little Sisters of the Assumption).

« It would be unfortunate that this beatification appear as a story of Catholics casting blame on Algerians and Muslims, when it is just the opposite that we wish to convey ». It is not a question of opening old wounds. Tirelessly, it has been repeated throughout North Africa, that « it was not a question of Muslims who killed Christians but a question of an entire people caught up in the vise of large-scale terrorism », in the words of Most Rev. Paul Desfarges, archbishop of Algiers. We cannot forget, nor the world-wide Catholic Church, the witness of some 200,000 Algerians, imams, writers, journalists, teachers, and medical personnel, who also « gave their lives in fidelity to their faith in God and to their conscience » during the Black Decade. In particular, there were those « 99 imams who lost their lives because they refused to justify violence ». The new blessed « are not heroes », but simply « members of a small Catholic Church in Algeria whom, « when you love them you do not abandon them in time of trial. It is the daily miracle of friendship and brotherhood ».

These beatifications are meant to tell us that hate is not a just response to hate, that we are not doomed to an inevitable spiral of violence. They are meant to be, rather, a step toward forgiveness and peace for all human beings, in Algeria and beyond its borders as well. They are a prophetic word for our world ». (Anne-Bénédicte Hoffner)

Br. Henri Vergès, Marist

Born on July 15, 1930 In the Eastern French Pyrenees, he entered a Marist formation program at age 12 and pronounced his final vows 10 year later. He arrived in Algeria at the age of 39, after independence had been declared, first as principal of St. Bonaventure School in Algiers, then as professor of mathematics at Sour-El-Ghozlane. His involvement in the Muslim world, his life “in this context » gave him an opportunity « to develop his Marist vocation more profoundly», he once wrote. In 1988, he became the director of the diocesan library located in the Casbah, and was often visited by young people. It was there that he, together with Sr. Paul-Hélène that he was assassinated.



Sr. Paul-Hélène Saint-Raymond, Little Sister of the Assumption

A Parisian, Sr. Paul-Hélène, born on January 24, 1927, entered the Little Sisters of the Assumption after completing her studies in engineering. Her first assignments had her serving working families in France during which time she studied nursing as well. Arriving in Algiers just after Independence in 1964, she worked as a nurse for 30 years in Algeria, but also in Morocco and for a brief time in Tunisia. She was the head of a medical center in a suburb of Algiers where she was so involved that her sisters had to urge her to slow down for fear that she would burn them out together with the rest of the staff. She would provide nursing care in homes, was responsible for assigning work to the staff, practiced minor surgery, got involved in trying to resolve social issues of clients like pensions and social security, and spent much effort in rehabilitating and equipping the physically handicapped.

She was very serviceable, unfailingly generous, extremely logical, quite intelligent, and possessing a phenomenal memory. Nevertheless, her frankness itself, her outspokenness, and frequent lack of tact could cause problems in her relationships and her unbending character made it difficult at times to live with her in community. But her humility, fraternal spirit, and capacity for dialogue largely compensated for these shortcomings. Her broad education and prodigious memory led to her nickname, « Madame Encyclopédie ». The depth of her faith helped her overcome many an interior struggle.

In 1988, she rejoined the community of Belcourt in Algiers where she worked at the diocesan library in the Casbah district of Algiers with Br. Henri Vergès. Reflecting on the challenge of the violence all around her, she once wrote that « one must begin by addressing her own violence ». To Bishop Teissier who had warned her of possible dangers ahead, she responded, « In any case, Father, we have already given over our lives ».

She was killed in the library on May 8, 1994 at the beginning of the afternoon, by a bullet to the head fired by Muslim terrorists who had entered disguised as policemen.

On January 26, 2018, together with 18 other brother and sister Algerian martyrs, Pope Francis recognized their death *in odium fidei*, thus allowing for their beatification.