

BR. HENRI VERGÈS (1930-1994)

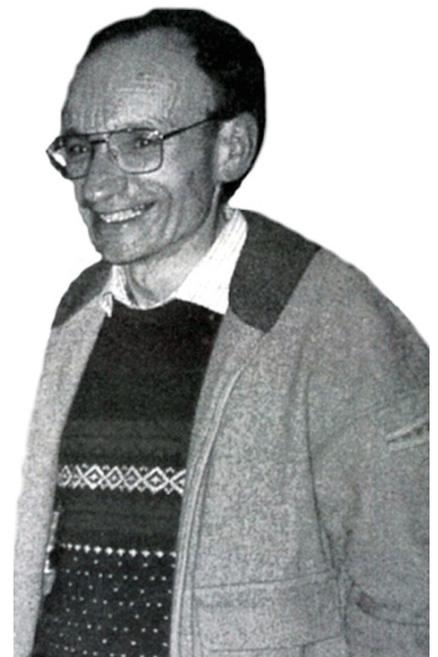
A Witness to the Gospel in the midst of Islam

On this day in 1994, a Sunday afternoon, Brother Henri Vergès offered the testimony of blood after 25 years in the service of young people in Algeria. We recall his memory with a text of Br. Michel Voute, from FMS Message 15 (October 1994).

He was born on 15th July 1930 in Mate male, a little village in the Capcir, a beautiful but harsh region in the eastern Pyrenees at an altitude of more than 1200 metres, very near Andorra and the Spanish frontier. His parents spoke Catalan. Henri was the eldest of six children: he had two brothers and three sisters. He entered the juniorate in 1942, in the middle of the Second World War. Life was difficult for everyone and those in charge had difficulty nourishing those in their care. Henri made his novitiate in 1945-46 at Saint-Paul-Trois-Châteaux, in a country liberated but impoverished. After a year's scholasticate at Notre-Dame de l'Hermitage, Brother Marie-Rodrigues (his name in religion) passed his Brevet Elementaire in Nimes in 1947 while at the same time teaching in the little school at Saint-Geniez d'Olt (Aveyron).

After spending two years in a sanatorium he courageously continued his studies; he gained his Bachelor of Philosophy, learned Spanish and taught mainly ... mathematics! Until 1969 his apostolate was carried out mainly in the south of France. From 1951 to 1956 he taught in Cheylard in the Ardeche. Then he worked in Aubenas and Bordeaux. From 1958 to 1966 he was sub-master of novices at Notre-Dame de Lacabane (Correze). He was then asked to take charge of the College of Bourg-dePeage (Drome). He was chosen as the delegate of his Province to the XVIth General Chapter in 1967-68. He finished his studies on the campus of the University of Montpellier in May 1968.

For a long time he had dreamed of working in the Missions and his superiors were aware of this. But he accepted various obediences which required his presence in France. Finally, in 1969 he was sent to Algeria to teach at the College of Saint-Bonaventure situated in the working class suburb



of Belcourt. He taught for one year, while at the same time studying Arab literature, before becoming the principal (1970-76). The nation-

GENERAL ADMINISTRATION

General Councillors Josep Maria Soteras and Eugène Kabanguka are on a visit to the Province of Norandina, Venezuela, from 4 to 19 May.

Br Antonio Ramalho C.G. is at the Mission Assembly of the Province of the Hermitage at the Hermitage from 6 to 10 May.

Br Javier Espinosa is accompanying the mixed community of brothers and laity of the Hermitage from 8 to 11 May.

Brs Ernesto Sanchez C.G. and César Rojas and Tony Leon of the Secretariat of Brothers Today are meeting with the International Commission of Brothers Today in the general house from 8 to 14 May.

alization of the schools carried out by President Boumedienne made it impossible for him, being a foreigner, to continue in charge. He applied in vain for Algerian citizenship. However, he managed to obtain a position as teacher of mathematics and French in a secondary school in Sour-El Ghoslane, 120 km to the south of Algiers. His contract was renewed annually for twelve years. He lived simply, for five years alone, without a Marist companion, in contact with the people in a cold little flat without running water. He was on good terms with his neighbours and built up friendships with his Moslem school colleagues.

In September 1988, right in the middle of the young people's revolt aimed at breaking the rule of the single Party, his bishop asked him to reopen the Library of the White Fathers in rue Ben Cheneb in the Casbah district of Algiers. For six years, aided at the outset by Brother Jesus Marcos and several Sisters, he directed all his Catalan dynamism, his ardent faith in youth, his rich experience in teaching, his love of the Arab culture and of his adopted country, to making his new place of apostolate an attractive and welcoming centre for youth, an effective aid to their study, a place of dialogue and liberty. On Sunday 8th May 1994, three extremists burst into the Library. Brother Henri and Sister Paul-Helene Saint-Raymond, an Assumptionist Sister, were shot in the head. The A.I.G (Armed Islamist Group) claimed responsibility for these cowardly and cold-blooded murders.

The funeral Mass took place on the Feast of the Ascension in the presence of Cardinal Duval, of the Bishops of Algeria, of several Ambassadors, of various Religious Communities and of a crowd of friends, both Christian and Moslem, still in shock, who filled the Basilica of Our Lady of Africa. "The hour is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is doing a holy duty for God." (John 16,2), as we read in the liturgy for the 9th May. The burying of this leaven, Henri and Paul-Helene, in the Algerian soil will be for the country a source of toler-

ance, of justice and of fraternity. The smiling welcome of our Brother, his competence, his sense of sharing has left its imprint on a whole generation of young people. He once wrote: "I must thank the Father, along with the



Sister Paul-Hélène Saint-Raymond, murdered together with Br. Henri.

Virgin Mary, for the inestimable gift of my spiritual journey which owes so much to my sharing my life in the midst of Islam."

Henri was a member of the Ribat, a group of Christian and Moslem believers who met for sharing and prayer in order to find the voice of peace and concord. Yes, Paul-Helene and Henri in following Jesus, have given their lives for their Algerian friends. They have been the presence of God in the land that they loved. They died as they lived: giving all.

It is a great loss for the young people of the Casbah and for our Marist Institute but it is also a great source of pride to have given such a teacher to youth, a religious so exemplary in his fidelity to his commitment, such a witness to the Gospel, respectful of everyone, attentive to and at the service of all. "His presence represented something paradoxical, something original, something prophetic, in the name of the Gospel opening up perspectives of peace in a country of violence" (Y.G.).

In Algiers, Henri Verges was at the

peak of his vocation as Marist teacher. His life, his action and his death challenge us. "God writes straight with crooked lines". We will be forever touched by the humble and gratuitous witness of this life given daily. Only Jesus can tell us the meaning of his sacrifice: "He loved them to the end ..." There remains to us the shining memory of Henri and Paul-Helene, artisans of peace.

"This assassination did not surprise me greatly, it was always possible. I fear that even more difficult times await the little Algerian Church: let us keep it in our prayers. We must understand the validity of the decision of Henri and Michel to stay over there: it was necessary both for the Church and for the Institute. That they were the first to be killed says much about the importance of their presence." (Fr. J. Marcos)

In celebrating the centenary of the Marist presence in Algeria (1891-1991) Henri said: "What will this second century which we are beginning hold for us? God alone knows! It is enough to go on, like Abraham, in faith, not knowing exactly where God was leading him but from one stage to the next he went on..."

May the dedicated lives of Henri and Paul-Helene be fruitful beyond our hopes. May the all-powerful and merciful God welcome them into his peace. May their sacrifice hasten the day of Reconciliation.

Brother Henri Verges is for us a shining example of faith, of courage, of audacity and hope.

A Champagnat for today, such in my eyes was our Brother Henri.

Brother Michel VOUTE- companion of Br Henri - FMS Message 15 – October 1994

We find other contents about Br. Henri Vergès in our site, in this link: <http://www.champagnat.org/530.php?p=183&b=Verges>



8 MAY 2014

20th anniversary of the death of Brother Henri Vergès

On 8 May 1994, Brother Henri Vergès was murdered in Algeria, in his office in the library of Ben Cheneb Street in Algiers, together with the Little Sister Paul-Hélène. Twenty years after his death, we place before you the conclusion of the preface written by Mgr Henri Teissier, Archbishop of Algiers, for the book of Robert Masson, published in 2004 in the series « Parole et Silence » : « Henri Vergès, a Christian in the house of Islam ». This preface, which is a testimony, is entitled « A Gospel path ».

"I would like above all to underline Henri's exceptional fidelity to his vocation as religious and educator. During the hours we tried to discern together how to live the stages of his life from 1981 to 1994, I never saw him desire anything other than the practice of this fidelity to his vocation as a Marist teaching brother.

Each of the nineteen victims of our community, during the Algerian crisis, illustrates a type of fidelity to his or her vocation, Pierre Claverie as bishop and Dominican, the Brothers of Tibhirine as Trappists in the Moslem rural world, the Sisters, each in their quarter, with the spiritual affinities proper to their charism. But Henri Vergès, in this family of our martyrs, gives a truly specific witness. He incarnates the fidelity to his double vocation of Marist religious and educator, without it being possible to find in his life, a single instant, a single preoccupation, a single thought, which is not ordered to this vocation. All this founded on an exceptional fidelity to his life of prayer and a very strong relationship with his congregation.

As he became inserted into Algeria, he also matured another harmonic in this fidelity. His life as a Marist religious and educator became a life in Moslem Algeria, for the Algerians and with the Algerians. The mounting perils, of which he was aware, changed nothing in this fundamental orientation, but added a willingness for spiritual solidarity with Islam and the Moslems, for which the Ribat would help him draw the whole meaning. His friendships, in particular with Brother Christian, the monks and the other members of the Ribat, deepened this call in him.

When violence took Henri from us, it seemed to us that it had struck in him, our vocation in its most perfect realisation. None of those who knew him could discern in his choices and the use of his time, anything



The funeral of Br. Henri and Sr. Paul-Hélène

other than the constantly renewed decision to do the will of God, according to his vocation, and according to the spiritual orientations given him by his existence in Algeria. Perhaps it is this correspondance, in him, between the vocation received and everyday life that they wanted to strike at. In striking at him, they struck at our ideal in one of its most impressive realisations. They struck at our mission itself. It is perhaps this which has enabled us to rediscover this mission, on emerging from the crisis, as clearly present in our Church and better recognised than ever by our Moslem Algerian friends, or at least those who believe with us in a future of spiritual dialogue between the two communities. A future we did not know in 1994 that we could live with more fullness still in 2004 than we had ever done before. The sacrifice of Henri Vergès, of Paul-Hélène, and all their companions subsequently have given our Church a new foundation."

Henri Teissier, Archbishop of Algiers

Mgr Henri Teissier, a accepté de participer aux deux journées organisées par le diocèse de Perpignan, avec le concours de la Fraternité « Le Ribat » d'Espira-de-l'Agly, les 17 et 18 mai prochain, pour commémorer le 20ème anniversaire de la Pâque de notre frère Henri. Qu'il en soit vivement remercié.

Frère Alain Delorme

Latest deceased Brothers

05/05/2014: Antonio Castagnetti Morini - Santa María de los Andes.

04/05/2014: João Orestes Fagherazzi - Rio Grande do Sul

03/05/2014: Hubert Wettasinghe - South Asia

02/05/2014: Georges Garrel - L'Hermitage

30/04/2014: Hipólito Lapeña Pérez - Ibérica

26/04/2014: Leopoldo Felipp, Brasil Centro-Sul

22/04/2014: Declan Duffy - Europe Centre-Ouest

19/04/2014: Alejandro Fernández Andrés - Mediterránea

13/04/2014: Joe (Jioseva Dauvakarauvanua) Wara - Pacific

12/04/2014: Antonino Díez Díez - Compostela

08/04/2014: Francisco Peruchena Ollacarizqueta - Mediterránea

18/03/2014: Rufino González las Heras - Ibérica

REGIONAL MEETING OF "ARCO NORTE"

New models of animation, governance and management project

The Regional Meeting of Arco Norte about the New Models of Animation, Governance and Management Project took place in the house of Quinta Soledad, Mexico City, from April 5 to 8, 2014. It is an initiative of the General Government, and part of a diagnostic process at all levels of the Institute. There will be six Regional Meetings this year with the Provincials, District Superiors, members of the Provincial Councils, Marist mission leaders, and the people involved with the New Models Project in each Administrative Unit (AU).

The Regional Meeting of Arco Norte had the following objectives:

- * Encouraging the participation of all the AUs, and communicating the Project's central goals, scope, approach, and planning.
- * Understanding the current context of the AUs and the Region.
- * Discussing and sharing ideas about the future of the project's three areas.

There were 52 participants in the meeting, which included a number of activities: workshops on different topics, around-the-table exchange and discussion, plenary sessions, and reflection on the Project's rationale. Brothers José María Soteras, Eugene Kabanguca, and João Carlos do Prado from the General Government also attended the meeting, and Brother Carlos Alberto Rojas participated as a member of the Project Team. It was a great opportunity for the Region to dream about the future of the Marist Institute.

In the days prior to the meeting, the consulting firm AT Kearney



and the Director of the Mission Secretariat visited the Provinces of the United States and Central Mexico to get acquainted with the situation of these AUs. The agenda included meetings with the participants from each Province.

This first meeting was also an opportunity to test the work methodology, and adapt it to the other Regions.

We thank the Province of Central Mexico for taking care of the logistics for the meeting, and we congratulate the Provinces of Arco Norte for the great effort they are making to promote the Marist mission and to be a prophetic presence among the children and youth in the Region.

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