



## BEATIFICATION OF THE MARTYRS IN ALGERIA

### HENRI VERGÈS NEW BLESSED MARIST BROTHER

The today's bulletin is an extraordinary edition on the Beatification of Br. Henri Vergès, together with other 18 martyrs from Algeria, religious, men and women, held on the solemnity of the Immaculate Conception (December 8, 2018) in the Shrine of Holy Cross, Oran (Algeria). The texts are from Br. Antonio Estaún, General Postulator.



#### Echoes from the feast of the Beatification

The Marist Delegation was integrated by a group of relatives and friends of Brother Henri Vergès, headed by Pierre (brother) and Marie (Sister), Samuel (nephew), Régine (niece), Jocelyn (niece) and Florian (grandnephew), as well as by a significant group of Brothers from France and Rome, headed by Brother Ernesto Sánchez Barba, Superior General, Father Ferré Jodra, Provincial from l'Hermitage and Brother Antonio Martínez Estaún, General Postulator. This Delegation shared the acts of the program of the Beatification together with the Brothers from the Marist communities of Oran and Mostaganem.

The arrival to Algeria confirmed the previous intuitions, which emerged during the procedure followed, to obtain

the Visa to enter the country. Approximately, five-hundred foreigners were expected to participate in the acts, presided over by the Delegate of the Pope. As foresight of this encounter, a whole operational act of control and accompaniment was put in place so that our stay in the Algerian territory developed under parameters of high security, which even if it occasioned some trouble or discomfort was a guarantee for the happy success of the visit.

The previous climate, ecclesial and social, was obtained by means of a reflection on faith, the coherence of life and the fidelity to history. With this reference, it was possible to deduce the sense to be given to the acts of violence, which were the cause of the death of the 19 blessed martyrs. It is not a question of Christians murdered by Mus-

lms, but of Christians murdered with Muslims. (Jean-Paul Vesco, Bishop of Oran). From this the will of the Catholic Church that the Beatification take place in Algeria. "We do not want a beatification of Christians among Christians, since those brothers and sisters died together with thousands of tens of Algerian Muslims who died during the decade of the civil war (1992-2002)". Paul Dsfarges, Archbishop of Algiers.

**December 7: Prayer vigil**

The program said that on Friday, December 7, 2018, at 20 hours, in the Cathedral of Holy Mary (Center Pierre Claverie), there would be a prayer vigil. In fact, in the evening in the Cathedral of Oran, next to the tomb of Pierre Claverie, an inter-religious prayer vigil, of hymns and witnesses, allowed the participants, especially for those from France, Belgium or Spain, to submerge themselves in the reality of the Algerian Church. The vigil was organized in the image of the religious men and women who chose to give their life for Christ in this country under the sign of "the friendship which comes from God". The Parish choir interpreted Sufi melodies mixed with the rhythmic and repetitive chant of Taizé. Nineteen names, that of each one of the new Blessed, printed each one on a ceramic lamp made present before the Assembly their surrendered life. In addition, twelve "heirs" of the Blessed shared with the Assembly the force and reality of their message.

After manifesting gratitude to the Algerian authorities, who understood and accepted the desire of the Church to celebrate this Beatification "in Algeria and with the Algerian people", the Bishop of Oran, Monsignor Vesco launched this vibrant challenge for the future: "The 21 century cannot be that of confrontation among religions", and he implored Heaven, recalling that "our common house is threatened because of climatic warming while the Mediterranean swallows ev-



ery day men and women who seek a better future".

**December 8: encounter in the mosque**

For Saturday, December 8, 2018, two important moments were foreseen on the program. In the middle of the morning, an encounter of the Authorities and the relatives of the new Blessed with the Muslim Religious authorities in the mosque and the ceremony of beatification of the new Blessed.

The encounter in the Mosque in the presence of the Muslim dignitaries of the city, both political and religious, developed in an environment of fraternity and tolerance. This encounter in the Great Mosque Ibn Badis wanted to express pardon and reconciliation of the Algerian people with the relatives of the Blessed in the presence of Cardinal Becciu and of the Algerian minister of Religious Affairs. "We, Muslims associate ourselves with great joy to this event", the Imam Mostapha Jaber said in the Great Mosque. Father Thierry Becker, collaborator of Blessed Pierre Claverie, reminded that the beatification of these Servants of God "shows that sharing life with members of another religion is Christian".

**Beatification Mass**

The beginning of the Beatification Mass was foreseen for 13 hours, presided over by Cardinal Becciu, Prefect of the Congregation of the Causes of Saints, in the Shrine of Our Lady of the Holy Cross. The transfer of the authorities and relatives from the center of the city to the Shrine, situated on the side of a mountain on the outskirts of the city in a place that dominates the port and part of the city of Oran obliged the delay of the beginning of the act.

The Beatification ceremony was celebrated in the Shrine of the Holy Cross. The election of this place was a thought election for a modest celebration in the measure of the Algerian Church in order that it would be in harmony with the vocation of this Church of which the new Blessed are a beautiful Icon.

The first part of the encounter was dedicated to the ceremony of the Beatification. After the greeting to those present there was the reading of the message of the Pope.



The Postulator of the Cause proclaimed the name of each one of the Servants of God together with a brief biography of each one and asked the Papal Delegate to proclaim them Blessed. Cardinal Becciu read in Latin the Decree of Beatification while a large banner opened out with the name and the image of the 19 new Blessed while the choir interpreted the Alleluia of Hendel.



Following this, the Prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints, Cardinal Becciu, gave to the General Superiors the Apostolic Letter in which they were notified that the member or members of their Institute had been officially proclaimed Blessed, and that the liturgical feast of the martyrs of Algeria will be celebrated in the universal liturgical calendar on May 8, every year.



The act was concluded with the celebration of the Holy Mass presided over by Cardinal Becciu, a numerous group of Bishops, the Algerian authorities, a good number of Imams with their white vestments. The members of the Assembly wore their best attire, with a great variety of dresses, hairstyles, gestures and songs, which adorned a multicultural multiethnic and inter-religious feast. This multi-culturality was manifested with readings of the Word, in French, Spanish and Arabic. The procession of the offerings integrated the dance and singing with the offering of typical fruits of the region carried by 12 girls. The Mass was animated by the joyful hymns of the choir of the Sub Saharan students caressed by a warm sun under a sky without clouds. The emotion raised in tone, at the moment of peace, when the Imams embraced the Catholic Bishops. At that moment and that was not the only one, the applause of the Assembly broke out together with the "youyous" of approbation.



For the numerous Algerians present, among who, we mention journalists and security forces; the participation in the

Catholic Mass was a primacy, and above all, a joy visible on the faces.

Once the Mass concluded we were able to enjoy a sober cold drink offered by the organization and prepared the day before in the house of the Brothers by the pupils of Brother César Egido, who study Spanish under his direction

**Sunday, December 9**

The travel from Oran to Algiers in buses was offered, free of charge, by the Algerian Government, to visit the cemetery of Belfort, where the tombs of Brother Henri Vergès and of Sisters Angèle-Marie Littlejohn and Bibiane Leclerc (Our Lady of the Apostles); Odette Prévost (Little Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Charles de Foucaul); and Paul-Hélène Saint Raymond (Little Sisters of the Assumption) are found. The tombs of the new Blessed have not been touched. We

found them decorated with white paint with one only ornament, a palm on the tomb.

In the visit to the cemetery moments of intense emotion were lived. A great group of neighbors of the neighborhood discreetly accompanied moments of prayer and of a profound experience lived there. Monsignor Teissier, emeritus of Algiers, who was protagonist during the times of the persecution as responsible for the Church of Algiers,

directed the prayer invoking the new Blessed and gave a touching witness of his experience. The words of Sister Odette Prévost, transformed into song offered a message of life: "Live this day that God gives you today; it is yours, live it in Him. The tomorrow belongs to God; it does not belong to you. Do not place on tomorrow the concerns of today. The tomorrow belongs to God, place it in His hands".



The thanksgiving Mass for the Beatification was celebrated in the Shrine of Our Lady of Africa in Algiers. It was presided over by the Bishop of Perpignan, Norbert José Henri Turini. It was a moment of encounter and communion with the faithful of the Parish, but above all with the members of the Delegations of religious and relatives of the Blessed martyrs buried in the cemetery of Belfort of Algiers. There the Brothers had the opportunity to share, especially with the Little Sisters of the Assumption, companions of Paul-Hélène Saint Raymond who died close to Brother Henri in the Casbah.

In the Shrine, recently remodeled interiorly, a ceramic mural or wall will be placed in the side Chapel at the right of the transept with the name of the 19 martyrs of Algeria.



## RESPONSE OF THE MEDIA TO THE BEATIFICATION OF THE MARTYRS IN ALGERIA

The ceremony of beatification of Pierre Claverie and his 18 fellow martyrs which took place in Orán on the 8th of December, 2018, has been followed very closely by the Algerian and foreign media, particularly by some sixty applications for accreditation requested by foreign journalists. The central act has been retransmitted by Channel Algeria DZ and the official statement in digital format has filled numerous specialized areas, and raising interesting reactions of which we will select the most significant.

The first thing that should be pointed out is the unanimity in highlighting the importance of the event. It is the first time that such an event, organised by the Catholic Church has taken place in a Muslim country. The city of Orán, in Algeria, welcomed this important event in a Muslim country on Saturday, December 8th 2018, in our chapel of Our Lady of Santa-Cruz (RFI Africa).

In the second place, it was made clear that these 19 beatified belonging to the Catholic Church are martyrs, which in the Christian language means "witness of the faith", be-



cause they were murdered because of their Christian faith and their devotion to the Algerian people whom they did not wish to leave, when it was submerged in the storm of an awful civil war (RFI). The 19 new beatified died in Algeria during the so-called "black decade."



These "19 martyrs from Algeria" are 15 French, two Spanish, one Belgian and one Maltese, belonging to eight different Catholic congregations, murdered between 1994 and 1996, during the civil war in Algeria (France Soir).

La Croix pointed out that this celebration which seemed to be "impossible", had finally taken place and had sent out a message of reconciliation and a possible healing of the wounds. In front of a large group which included the families of the beatified, representatives of the four dioceses of Algeria, Algerian friends, and also a large number of officials, - among them the Secretary for Religious Affairs, Mohamed Aissa and the Wali (prefect) of Oran - the celebration sent out a message of "reconciliation and brotherhood."

Because, incredible as it may seem, it has been Algeria, a country with a long memory of suffering, still divided between the temptation to look inwards and openness, that has welcomed the first beatification in a country that is overwhelmingly Muslim. A country that has even said in the last few months that it is willing to welcome Pope Francis who "wishes to visit", the bishop of Oran, Jean-Paul Vesco said... and that he has many surprises to offer.

**Difficulties**

But this beatification has raised a delicate topic, especially with regard to how it would be received by the Algerian people. "The risk is that suddenly in Algeria or in the Muslim world, it might be said: " here is a church that honours its 19 victims when we have lost 200.000", among them a hundred Imams, something which is not recognised at all in France, the bishop of Oran Jean-Paul Vesco pointed out some months ago. But, on the other hand, the Imam of the mosque situated at the bottom of the Kasbah, while preaching on Friday after the murder of Brother Henri Vergès and Sister Paul Hélène, denounced this murder and he himself was murdered. If we are speaking of that, obviously, the beatification is filled with meaning."

This is, in fact, the message of this exceptional beatification, the first one in the land of Islam: men and women of the Church were murdered side by side with Muslims who rejected radicalisation and violence (RFI). Because of this it was the intention of the Catholic Church that the beatification should take place in Algeria.

The 19 religious are considered to be martyrs. For Jean-Paul Vesco, martyrs are those who prefer to die rather than give up their faith. "This word martyr in relation to the 19 creates a problem, because it encourages the false

interpretation that Christians were murdered by Muslims. Jean-Paul Vesco, bishop of Oran, explained in a conference-debate the significance of this event. It is not Christians murdered by Muslims, but Christians murdered with Muslims". (<https://www.catholiques17.fr>) In fact, these 19 were murdered because they were Christians, but also because they were foreign. During that period, the guerrillas also killed Imams, intellectuals... who are not victims of their faith but victims like all the others. Therefore, for him, this beatification is "worth presenting to the entire world " the testimony of a life and a death. (<https://www.catholiques17.fr>)

In spite of the risks, the 19 beatified martyrs refused to abandon Algeria and their people, with whom they said that they were profoundly united. It was because of this that the Catholic Church wished their beatification to take place in Algeria,

according to Bishop Paul Desfarges. We did not want a beatification among Christians, because these brothers and sisters died amid dozens and thousands of Muslim Algerians" who died during the decade (1992-2002) (<https://www.catholiques17.fr>).

Juan Pablo Vesco, the current Bishop of Oran, proposed that the city of Oran should celebrate the beatification. He explained his reasons: "In my opinion, their beatification should take place in the country where they lived, especially when they chose to stay united with their Algerian and Muslim friends, in spite of the threat". This option seemed to be complicated if it were to be summed up and even to be accepted by the Algerian authorities. "But to my great surprise, in my meeting with the Secretary of Religious Affairs, the proposal for the beatification site was



welcomed and he even offered better facilities" (<https://www.catholiques17.fr>).

However, Jean Paul Vesco, also considered the fear that it could be open to negative interpretations of this beatification, the first of them was having it here in Algeria. He said. "Can we imagine that the Church wanted to hold the beatification of these religious here in Algeria; would it not be grotesque because what are 19 people in comparison to the 200.000 Algerian victims? "This reflection could lead to a negative interpretation that would have, Jean-Paul Vesco says, the consequence of separating the Church from the rest of the country. It is "exactly the opposite of what we want to do. This beatification is by way of official recognition of the way that we live our religion here in Algeria. It does not only highlight the way of life characteristic of the Church here in Algeria, but also the way that we live together" (<https://www.catholiques17.fr>).

Mohammed Bouchikhi, 22 years old, who was murdered together with Bishop Pierre Claverie, offers the key to a convincing answer. "The blood of Mohamed Bouchikhi (22 years old) mingled with that of Pierre Claverie, through this beatification, highlights this bond between Christians and Muslims" (<https://www.catholiques17.fr>).

### A great sign

To live together in peace was a strong message given by the Muslim and Christian religious authorities, through the beatification of the Christian monks and the homage given to the 114 murdered Imams (Le Soir d'Algerie).



The beatification in Oran this Saturday of the 19 Catholic religious who died in Algeria during the black decade, is for the entire world "a great sign of fraternity for Algeria," Pope Francis said (The Watan.com).

### Political dimension

The loyal media have been most inclined to highlight this dimension. This ceremony is above all a victory for the authorities and for Mohamed Aissa, the Secretary for Religious Affairs. It was he who was involved in the organization of this ceremony, even ensuring that the families of the beatified attended. This celebration, the arrival of a Cardinal from the Vatican, are all strong symbols of the image of Algeria. And this is what the minister Aissa affirmed: "That the Algeria of Muslims coexists with other religions is a sign" (RFI Africa).

## BR HENRI VERGÈS, MARIST MARTYR



Br Henri is one of the 19 martyrs of Algeria. He was killed at his place of work on 8th May 1994, together with Sister Paul-Hélène. He had been working since 1988 in Algiers, in the Casbah, in charge of the Library that served many students. Further information on Br Henri Vergès can be found at <https://bit.ly/2EECZOG>.



According to Jean-Baptiste Lemoyne, Secretary of State, formerly Secretary for Europe and External Affairs, "the fact of being gathered together here today, all the testimonies, all the stories about the memory of these religious are a very strong sign" (Le Quotidien d'Oran).

On this occasion, the Minister for Religious Affairs recalled that this national reconciliation could heal the wounds. We will "move on, but we will not forget. We are looking ahead to the future and we will strive to make our society one of peace, of reconciliation and of genuine coexistence". Cardinal Becciu also speaking in the mosque, said: "We will all work together for a fair society based on peace and respect. We are all committed to living in peace" (Le Soir d'Algerie).

As well as the beatification being "a very profound recognition on the part of the Catholic Church demonstrating that these monks opted to serve in Algeria with dedication and devotion" after an investigation that has lasted five years by which the Secretary of Religious Affairs, Mr. Mohamed Aissa was able to announce that "the Catholic recognition of these monks does not exclude the recognition of their efforts on the part of Algeria. It is for that reason that the recognition will also be political", added Mohamed Aissa (Le Quotidien d'Oran).

The Secretary of Religious Affairs was able to say, with regard to this event organized by the Algerian authorities in collaboration with the Catholic Church of Algeria, that Algeria is a pluralistic country, this Algeria that defends coexistence (the name given to the esplanade of the church of Santa Cruz), coexistence and cohesion, and also demonstrates that Algeria is a true country that respects the cult of freedom, and where freedom of conscience is guaranteed by the Constitution" (Liberté).



The Secretary of Religious Affairs, wishing to respond to the critics of this beatification, explained that it is "an Algerian initiative and it makes me proud that it comes from the Catholic Church of Algeria, and from their Bishop who is of Algerian nationality" (Liberté).

The Algerian authorities had a red line: the politics of national reconciliation. But for the present Algerians at the beatification, it was not a question of politics, but rather one of remembering and sharing (RFI).

### Interreligious Dimension

The celebration of the beatification in an Islamic country has brought about a dimension of interreligious dialogue, coexistence and understanding.

Invited to enter the impressive prayer room of the mosque, all the guests, as much Muslim as Christian, shared a single conversation: peace and coexistence (Le Soir d'Algerie).

Coexistence in peace has been a strong message from the Muslim and Christian religious authorities, through the beatification of the Christian monks and the tribute to the 114 murdered Imams (Le Soir d'Algerie).

The Muslim dignitaries of the city took part in the celebration as they received the families of the beatified in the Great Ibn Badis Mosque, in the presence of Cardinal Becciu and the Minister of Religious Affairs for Algeria. "We Muslims happily associate ourselves with this event", Imam Mostapha Jaber said, in the Great Mosque (France Soir).

Bishop Jean-Paul Vesco: We cannot commence this celebration without paying tribute in the Great Mosque, to the thousands and thousands of Algerian victims of 1990" (RFI AFRICA).

Father Thierry Becker, the former assistant of Bishop Claverie reminded the AFP: His beatification "shows that a life shared with those of another religion is Christian". (France Soir).

### Ecclesiastic dimension

The beatification has been an opportunity to demonstrate the identity of the Algerian Church and its particular way of living the Christian life, for the most part in the poorer parts of a Muslim town. This dimension has been especially highlighted by the local press.

"The celebration of the beatification ceremony in the Sanctuary of Santa Cruz is a modest option in agreement with our Church, as they resemble each other in the best possible way the vocation of our Church, of which our beatified become in this way a beautiful icon". (combined Declaration of the Bishops from Algeria mentioned by Le Quotidien d' Orán). Jan-Paul Vesco, Bishop of Oran remarked: "The meaning of these beatifications is the value of the testimony of the Christians murdered with Muslims". It is not to centre attention on "the Christian victims of this violence", but of putting them "in communion with all Algerians" who have suffered a great deal during the civil war which killed at least 200.000 people in Algeria. (Le Quotidien d'Oran).

The Church of Algeria has a strong sense of interreligious dialogue. This event was seen to be an exchange ceremony between Christian and Muslims (RFI AFRIQUE). The headline of Le Soir d'Algerie which gave news of this event is significant: "Muslim and Christian Religious in communion."

In the speech of Pope Francis, read out for the occasion, this ceremony helps, he says, to heal the wounds of the past and to create a new dynamic of coexistence. The Pope gave thanks to the President of the Republic for facilitating the organization of this celebration while paying tribute to the children and daughters of Algerian victims of the same violence (Le Soir d'Algerie).

Monsignor Jean-Paul Vesco invited the faithful present in the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Santa Cruz to observe a minute's silence "in tribute to the Algerian town and its leaders who have rediscovered the one true route to peace in spite of such painful wounds" (RFI).

### Prophetic dimension: "May peace be with you"

Because they have experienced the friendship between Christians and Muslims until the end, because they announced universal "love for all", the recognition on the part of the Church of these 19 new beatified is certainly a prophetic act. (Le Croix).



To summarise this event we can offer an icon and a document. The attractive image is that of the icon fashioned for the celebration: we see the 19 religious beatified with their heads surrounded by a halo. And in the right lower part, Mohamed Bouchikhi, the chauffeur of the bishop of Oran.

Mohammed, 22 years old, was murdered at the side of Bishop Pierre Claverie, in front of the bishop's residence in Oran, on the 1st of August 1996. His diary finishes with this sentence in literary Arabic which was read out during the celebration:

"In the name of God, the Clement, the Merciful One, I say: may peace be with you. I thank the person who might read my diary. And I tell all of those that I have known in my life that I thank them. I say

that they will be rewarded on Judgement Day. I feel sad for anyone who hurts me. He forgives those who forgive me in days of trial. I ask forgiveness of anyone who has heard a bad word spoken by me. I remember when I did well in my life. May God in his omnipotence take me to Himself and grant me his love" (Le Croix).

Br. Antonio Martínez Estaún, Postulator General

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