

Author Commentary

“Obedience” by Karl Plank

The story of the martyrs of Atlas, made widely known in Xavier Beauvois’s 2010 film *Des Hommes et des dieux*, has offered compelling testimony to what it may mean to live a life of Christian faith in a context of terror and violence. As this small group of Trappists near the Algerian village of Tibhirine faced the threat of imminent death from Islamic fundamentalists, as early as 1993, they underwent a season of intense reflection on their monastic vows and vocation. This culminated in a renewed commitment to remain in place, in solidarity with *les petits*—the poor, Muslim villagers with whom they shared their life and who also knew great jeopardy; and to remain true to their calling as contemplative witnesses to non-violence and hospitality. Such commitment eventuated in the kidnapping of seven monks during the night of March 27-28, 1996 and their death on May 21, 1996.

Most prominent among the monks was their prior, Dom Christian de Chergé, whose written testament anticipated the events that were to come and asked that they be understood as acts of genuine friendship, graced with the prospect of seeing God’s face even and especially in the face of that “friend of the final moment.” Yet, among the legacy of the Atlas brothers, we have also come to know the voice of a younger monk, Fr. Christophe Lebreton whose journals and poems from this time show passionate struggle and a path to deep, peaceful resolution. On June 5, 1994 his journal reads: “Christian talked to me about us as hostages. Yes, but we must live this experience identified with the little people, with a view to LIBERATION and with the very FREEDOM of Jesus Christ; ‘No one can take my life.’” Both Christian and Christophe had been reading Levinas and the availability of categories such as ‘hostage’ and ‘face’ resonate with his writing. But, we see even more Christophe’s bringing together the circumstance in which his being a hostage was likely with the sacrificial pattern of the gospel in which one’s life is already given.

“Obedience” reflects both the Cistercian vow to hear and obey and Christophe’s reckoning of the moment as one of willing sacrifice in which “no one can take (his) life” for it is he who offers it. Fittingly, the publication of his journal appeared in French under the title *Le souffle du don*: “the breath of the gift.”