

## Living in a Colonial Bubble

*The Certainty of Being Loved*, written by Fr Martin, is perhaps best described as a spiritual biography. It traces the spiritual journey of Bishop Pierre Claverie OP, born in 1938 in Bab el Oued, Algiers, the fourth generation of a family of European settlers. As a young man he experienced the anguish of the Algerian war of independence (1954-1962), and later the bitterness of the Algerian civil war (1992-2002). Growing up in Algiers, Pierre was totally unaware of his Muslim neighbours who made up ninety per cent of the population. In his own words he lived “in a colonial bubble”.

The only Algerians whom he came to know were at the lycée, and these few students had been completely assimilated to the French way of life. It was only when Pierre joined the Dominicans in France that he came fully to realise that he had shut out of his existence all those people, all of those neighbours to whom the parable of the Good Samaritan draws our attention. This realization came as a great shock and spiritual awakening and would eventually lead Pierre to offer his life as a ransom for peace and reconciliation between Christians and Muslims.

His escape from the ‘colonial bubble’ and the colonial myth of superiority was the beginning of his religious vocation, a vocation to break down barriers and to see every person as of equal dignity and value. It was in the aftermath of the savage war of independence (1954-62) that Pierre, now a Dominican priest, returned to his native country. Through tirelessly working for reconciliation, he sought to make some amends for a colonial past (and his unwitting participation in it). This former relationship of ‘superior’ / ‘inferior’ between the coloniser and colonised had deeply scarred the Algerian psyche and still, more than fifty years on, makes relationships between Algeria and France tense and problematic.

In 1993 Pierre and his companion martyrs had been put under sentence of death by the GIA (Armed Islamic Group) who had given all foreigners an ultimatum to leave Algeria by 1 December or face execution. All of the nineteen martyrs chose to remain in Algeria out of a love of Christ and a desire to serve the Muslim people. As Pierre wrote towards the end of his life: “I have worked tirelessly for dialogue and friendship among peoples, cultures and religions. All of that has probably merited for me death and I am willing to run the risk.”

The beatification of Bishop Pierre Claverie OP, and his eighteen companion martyrs (1994-1996), took place in the Basilica of Santa Cruz, Oran, Algeria on 8 December 2018. In his message to the congregation Pope Francis declared: “Through the Beatification of our nineteen brothers and sisters, the Church wishes to bear witness to her desire to continue working for dialogue, harmony and friendship. We believe that this unprecedented event in your

country will trace in the Algerian sky a great sign of fraternity addressed to the entire world.”

This fraternity was something for which Blessed Pierre Claverie had knowingly and willingly given his life. Pierre was a man of dialogue who sought to value difference and to learn from it. His lifelong struggle for peace and reconciliation between Christians and Muslims speaks strongly to our tormented times. Pierre’s witness, his martyrdom, reminds us that the light can overcome the darkness. As he wrote in an editorial in the diocesan magazine, *Le Lien*, in 1982: “The saints, all the saints, are our living Gospel, written in letters of flesh and blood: on the obscure chaos of a humanity searching for light, they proclaim the greatness of God and the greatness of humanity, because ‘man is the human face of God’ (Gregory of Nyssa).”