

Interview with Dominican Fr. Jean-Jacques Pérennès
Oct. 22, 2007

Bishop Pierre Claverie of Oran, Algeria, was assassinated in 1996. His cause for sainthood recently opened along with 18 other martyrs of a bloody civil war that left 150,000 Algerians dead. Now available is a powerful new biography *A Life Poured Out*, written by Fr. Jean-Jacques Pérennès, a personal friend of Claverie as well as a fellow Dominican. The book has already been published in French and Arabic, and is now available in English from Orbis.

Oct. 22, NCR senior correspondent John L. Allen Jr. sat down at the Dominican's Friary of St. Vincent Ferrer in New York for a conversation with Pérennès.

NCR: If you could put in just a few words what we can learn about Christian/Muslim relations from the life of Bishop Pierre Claverie, what is it?

Pérennès: I think the message is that to meet the other, to reach the other, you first have to get out of your own closed world, what he called for himself his "colonial bubble." His childhood was a closed world, and he had to get out of that. All of us, Christians and Muslims as well, must do this. Then, we must be able to deal with the otherness of the other. Often we are looking for what is like us in the other. We have to enjoy the difference, which means having fun, taking pleasure in difference. I think Pierre in some ways did that quite well.

He had a quite personal vision of inter-religious dialogue. He was not so involved in the big events that took place after Vatican II, the great Muslim/Christian conferences in Tripoli and Tunis and so on. He thought they were often empty words, saying that we are all the "sons of Abraham." He said no, our history is a difficult one, is a wounded one. We've been fighting one another very much in the past. We have to address the diversity, to reach the otherness of the other, and to learn from these differences. It's a very courageous approach, which has a number of implications. If you deal with the difficulties, you have to try to heal these wounded memories. In some ways, John Paul II was very good in this. He knew a lot about Communism, Nazism, and he knew that if we want to go forward, we first have to heal the wounds of the past. Pierre was a quite interesting example of that.

In 1963, Pope John XXIII received Alexi Adjubei, the son-in-law of Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. A story is told about that encounter that may well be apocryphal, but it nonetheless makes a point. Supposedly Adjubei was surprised by the pope's warmth and said, "But Holy Father, we have such different ideas," to which John XXIII is said to have responded, "What are ideas among friends?" I have the sense that, to some extent, that also captured the spirit of Claverie.

Exactly. Pierre used to say that if you build friendship with somebody, it doesn't matter if you disagree at some stage. He was very Mediterranean. He had a great gift for friendship, for enjoying parties and being with people. He was quite social. Through this way, he was able to have really wonderful contacts, even with some traditional Muslims.

So is the point that friendships must come before formal theological exchanges?

Yes, because if you start with formal theological exchanges, you come very quickly to big, difficult problems. We will argue about the Trinity and other matters, which requires a lot of skills, reflection, and preparation to deal with it well. But if you start at the human level, it's different. Often Claverie would say, 'We don't have the words for dialogue yet.' So, let's start

first by living together, addressing together common challenges. This is what he tried to do in his diocese, as in the other dioceses in Algeria. The aim was to build what he called 'platforms of encounter,' meaning places where people can work together on human rights, women's issues, and so on. Then you feel that you are all human beings, you come closer to each other. It will take a lot of time to really have a theological discussion.

You might have seen last week this important letter from 138 Muslim leaders, which is nice, though in some ways a bit strange because they use Christian vocabulary. It's a very interesting step, but you need a lot of time to be able to really reach a theological level of discussion. There's a lot to do before.

Claverie's personal experience was important, because he knew from his own life story that he could live for 20 years [in colonial Algeria] without ever seeing the Arabs, who were all around him. This happens in many of our cities, where we live nearby many different people but we don't dare go out and meet them.

Are you saying that if he were still alive today, Claverie would not be terribly excited by this letter? That he would prefer direct encounter?

No, he would be happy to see that the Muslims are trying to take a step toward dialogue. This happened one year after the Regensburg speech, and the reaction in the Arab world has been very tough – excessive, but very tough. I think they want to give a sign that this was not the whole reaction on their behalf. I live in Cairo, and after the Regensburg lecture we met with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar University and the Minister of Religious Affairs in Egypt, and both told us they were a bit embarrassed, because now there will be a great deal of noise. They said, 'We need to calm our extremists.'

We Americans sometimes think in ideological categories, so we want to know if someone is liberal or conservative. It's difficult to put Claverie in one of these categories. If you compare him to the pied-noirs [French settlers in Algeria], he seems quite liberal. If you compare him later to some doves with regard to Islamic radicals, he can seem conservative. How do you think of him?

In some ways he was quite traditional, in his way of being, his mindset. He was born in a traditional family – open-minded, nice people, but traditional. At Le Saulchoir [a Dominican facility outside Paris where Claverie studied], he left before the revolution of 1968. Had he been there, I don't think he would have been happy in this kind of movement. I wouldn't say he was conservative, but it was a more traditional style. I think he was very intelligent, able to get to the important issues. I often saw him reading very interesting books of theology, always trying to grasp new issues. His approach was not ideological. It was more human, driven by his heart and his faith as well. He's a bit different, in some ways.

It seems he was impatient with over-simplification. When he was in France, he never felt comfortable knee-jerk criticisms of the pied-noirs or the colonial experience. Later, he was frustrated with a sort of "Can't we all just get along" approach to Islamic radicalism. He always seemed not quite comfortable in great movements.

There's a very nice letter, when his father is leaving Algeria. His father had written a very sad letter about how they are losing everything, and Pierre replies, 'This revolution is not for us. It is done by the ideologues and the crooks. But I shall have to take my part in the process later on.' It's brilliant, because he shows that he's very clever in terms of political analysis. You cannot cheat him easily. This is why, perhaps, he disagreed with Sant'Egidio at one stage, because they just wanted to bring the people together and to sit down around a table. But he knew quite well the complexity of the radical Muslim movements. He didn't want to jeopardize

the future of the church by linking the church to these kind of people. He was very clever, but he was never a man of ideology.

Was there a part of him that enjoyed singing outside the chorus?

Yes, in a sense. His dream has always been to reach the other, to what was different, because of his personal history. Trying to meet the Muslims or the intellectuals was very important to him. Yet he belonged to the church, he was deeply rooted in the church. He was a man of faith, a man of prayer, a man of community. Building bridges was always his passion, first over the two banks of the Mediterranean, and then between Muslims and Christians.

Though Claverie was very much an Algerian, it seems there's a sense in which he was never completely at home anywhere.

That was more true as time went on. After the 1970s, the Muslim ideology grew strongly throughout the Arab world, and Algeria got that as well, through the influence of teachers coming from the Middle East to teach Arabic to the Algerian middle class and the country's leaders. He was not very happy with that, with this strong ideology. He didn't agree with that. He didn't feel at ease. He asked for Algerian citizenship when he was a bishop and he was never granted it, probably because there were strong movements within the Algerian government who were quite xenophobic.

At that time, would he have been perceived by the radicals as too close to the government?

He was not close to the government at all.

But would he have been seen by the Islamic Salvation Front, for example, that way?

This happened in the late years of his life. The Islamic Salvation Front started to be very strong in the 1990s, and he died in 1996. The tough time was 1993 to 1996, when they started to kill intellectuals and so on. He was very close to these people. Often when he was alive I told him, 'You are not careful enough,' because he was very outspoken. He went on the radio, and was not protecting himself at all. Re-reading his life through the biography, I discovered that for him this was a kind of resistance. There's a beautiful text of Dietrich Bonhoeffer which he used. I understood through this re-reading of how he understood Bonhoeffer that in some ways, he was giving himself to this resistance movement, together with women, intellectuals, people who died with him. This is very important, because it means that the church has really been part of the process of fighting against extremism. As Archbishop Tessier says often, 'We have been there, we have lost people as well, so it's our country.'

In the early 1990s, in some ways the situation in Algeria came down to a choice between Islamic radicalism and a police state. Italian director Gillo Pontecorvo, who made the famous film La Battaglia di Algeri thirty-five years earlier, said in 1998 that it was a choice "between cholera and the plague." In that context, did Claverie prefer the police state to the Islamists?

Not at all. I think the reason for his death was that he spoke against violence, no matter where it came from. He was attacking not only the violence of the Islamists, but also the violence of the state. He knew the repression was terrible. They were killing everyone, to get rid of these people. His view was, 'Let us talk, even with the Islamists,' though putting some conditions. Let us bring the society to have a common discussion, and then we'll see what comes from that. But violence as an answer to violence doesn't lead to any solution.

This was the accusation some made against the bishop, that in this awful situation, he sided with the government.

Yes, they called them 'eradicators.' Even Archbishop Tessier was accused of this. Sant'Egidio has been a little bit on this side.

But you're saying it's not so?

Not at all. They were not at all involved in that, and they didn't agree with it. They always have said, 'Let us try to live together, to talk to each other, and then we can go forward to a possible encounter.'

Claverie believed in a liberal, tolerant, democratic Algeria as a third way between Islamism and dictatorship. It's now more than ten years since his death, and although Algeria is calmer, it doesn't seem much more democratic. Was his dream naïve?

It's strange, because in some ways this country is quite educated. There's a high literacy level, and they have access to the Western media. Many Algerians speak French, so they look at the French channels on TV. In some ways, they have the skills to understand what goes on in a democracy. I think there is a deep aspiration for democracy in many people. But the country has been run by the military since 1965, since the coup d'état of Boumédiène in 1965. With Bouteflika [the current president], the army is running the show. In some ways, there is no real space for open discussion. When the Islamists nearly won the elections in January 1992, it was because there were real free elections organized in December 1991. This might happen in many Muslim countries. In Egypt, where I live, if you have free elections, the Muslim Brotherhood would rule the country.

So was the dream of a democratic Algeria unrealistic?

I don't think so, because if you really invest in education, building links between people, things can change. Algerian society has a lot of NGOs, a lot of people working at the grassroots level. There's a gap between these people, however, and those who are running the country, who are becoming a mafia – a big mafia that controls the import/export trade and the oil trade.

You know, the prophets are always told they are not realistic.

Sometimes that's true, isn't it? In other words, was it ever realistic to believe that liberal democratic institutions could co-exist with the powerful Islamic currents in the country? Was Claverie, in the end, working for something that was just as destined to fail as the French colonial system against which he reacted?

First of all, I do not think the Algerian people are looking for an Islamist regime. In some ways, they voted for them because of the mess in which they found themselves, in which Islamism seems like a moral point of reference, an ethical reference. It offers some possibility of saying what's good and what's bad, and that justice will be accomplished. It's a kind of dream that an Islamic regime could solve the problems. The only way is to build up together a society with rules, with relationships, with partnerships. I think the Algerians can do that, but the regime doesn't allow it. The third way is possible, but first something has to change. Some people have so many privileges in this situation. In fact, this situation is very good for a few people in Algeria. For those who are running the country, things are okay. They would lose a lot if we have a real democratic system, because they would have to share the wealth and the decision-making.

Your book carefully avoids the question of who was actually responsible for Claverie's death, which as you know is a debated point. Some blame Islamic militants, other government security services. Do you have any opinion?

I didn't talk about it because we don't have certainty. We know that he spoke very strongly against radical Islam, and against the violence of the state. Both these two groups had interests to kill him. Then, we are not even sure they wanted to kill him at all. Maybe they just wanted to frighten him. Some people say that. Having no certainties, I couldn't write about it, because to write about it you have to be sure. Most people think there was a kind of alliance between some radical Muslim movements, and some groups within the state's secret services.

You know, this is not a homogenous situation. You have different groups fighting among themselves. It's like the death of the monks. [Note: the reference is to seven Trappist monks killed at the Tibhirine monastery in Algeria in May 1996.] Who killed them? It's very difficult to say.

You know, 150,000 people have been killed. I was teaching at Algeria University at that time, and one of my colleagues, a man who sat at the desk next to me, was killed. We were never asked anything. Nobody ever came to make any inquiries to find out what happened, whether he worried or not. He was an Algerian Muslim.

Let's suppose that it could be established that it was government security agents rather than the Islamic militants who killed Claverie. Would that change anything?

No, because the main message was that we have to talk to each other and we have to refuse violence. It matters for history and for establishing responsibility. Many countries have war tribunals and it's important to establish who has done what, who caused what damage. But for his own personal situation, it doesn't change anything.

Do you believe Claverie was killed in odium fidei?

Not directly. I don't think he was killed directly *in odium fidei*. But he was killed because the message he was carrying, which is an evangelical message, was so different from the mainstream. When you say 'I'm ready to give my life,' this comes from the gospel.

In your mind, is he a martyr?

Certainly. It's very clear. If you read the last texts he wrote, he knew perfectly well that he was going to be killed, and he didn't refuse this possibility. I know people with whom he talked about it.

What would he say?

He said, 'I don't know when it will happen, but I have to be there, I have to fulfill my mission.'

Do you believe that someday he will be beatified and canonized?

The process started two weeks ago in Algiers for the 19 priests and nuns, along with Claverie, from the Algerian church. It will take time.

Does this include the monks?

Yes. It was in October. The postulator came from Rome, and there was an official meeting to mark the opening of the process in the archbishop's house in Algiers. The question some ask is why we have to underline our martyrs, in a country where so many innocents have been killed. The way they answer is quite fine, I think. They say, 'We have underlined the message of those who didn't refuse to give their lives.' There were so many – women, intellectuals, journalists, and so on. They knew they were in danger if they continued their jobs. For a woman, even to continue to work was dangerous, it was a risk. But they took this risk. They gave their lives for a democratic Algeria, a more open Algeria, a non-Islamist Algeria.

So these 19 Catholic martyrs are, in a way, representatives of a much larger group of people who have given their lives?

I would say that. When Pierre was installed as bishop in Oran in 1981, we were a lot of Christians and few Muslims. When he was buried, the Muslims were the majority. Last year, in June 1996, we organized a kind of commemoration of the tenth anniversary of his death. There were 400 people over two days, mainly Muslims. For me, this is the evidence that his message is getting through. The group included young people who never met him, but they told us, 'We have heard of him and want to know who he was.' This to me shows that his choice was the right one, to be courageous until the end, like Jesus did. On the way to Jerusalem, he knew what was

going to happen. His disciples said, “We are scared, you shouldn’t go.’ Just as I said to Pierre, ‘You should protect yourself.’ This was a choice he shared with many Algerians, Christian and Muslim.

Some people have drawn attention to the fact that Claverie had a meeting with the French Foreign Minister the day of his death. Do you believe that if not for this meeting, he would still be alive?

I don’t think so, because there signs in the weeks leading up to his death that he was being carefully checked. It was just an accident it happened on that day. For the monks it was different, because they were killed in a context in which a plane of Air France had been hijacked, and they were kidnapped [as part of that cycle of violence]. But for Pierre, I don’t think so. In fact, he didn’t want to go to this meeting, because he said that he had nothing to do with the French Minister of Foreign Affairs. His friends told him to go because they needed visas, and they wanted him tell the minister that we need to keep in touch with France, we don’t want France to close its borders.

In a 1995 interview with a French newspaper, Claverie said that he regretted the decisions of some religious orders to leave Algeria. Do you think he felt a lack of ecclesial solidarity?

At one stage it was very difficult for him. The last time I met him was in Rome, as I was at that time the socius of Timothy Radcliffe [former master general of the Dominican order], and he told me it was a tough situation for people. Some people cannot cope with so much violence, so the bishop always told the religious, ‘Feel free. If you cannot cope with that, you can go.’ At the same time, he saw that religious orders were not really proposing new people [to replace those who left]. It was difficult to do so, of course, and both sides are understandable. But yes, he had a feeling that, ‘We are a bit lost here, we are a bit forgotten.’

But to be complete, they got real permanent support from the Holy See. When the Sant’Egidio affair took place, the line of the Secretariat of the State, of the Vatican, was very clear. They met with the Secretary of State, and it was very clear that they had real support from the pope. So in that sense, the church was behind them.

The renowned French Catholic journalist Henri Tincq offered a reconstruction that was a bit different. According to him, Sant’Egidio had the personal backing of John Paul II, while the Secretariat of State and the Vatican diplomatic corps was closer to the line of the Algerian bishops.

One problem with Sant’Egidio is that their links with Algerian Muslims were old. It was Archbishop Tessier who helped them at the beginning, ten years before, to start to make links with Algeria. In the meantime things had changed, and it was difficult for them from abroad, not speaking Arabic, to be really updates, to be informed on the real situation. In some ways, I found it very sad that they kept insisting on this project against the will of the local bishops. It was very difficult for them to explain that this “Rome Platform” was not the real opinion of the Catholic Church. It’s a delicate matter.

The fundamental problem with the Rome Platform, as Claverie and the other bishops saw it, was including the Islamic Salvation Front without any conditions, such as renouncing violence?

Exactly. They were not asked at the beginning to reject violence, as a preamble to negotiations. But the FLN was also a problem. [The National Liberation Front, which has been the dominant force in Algeria since the era of the anti-colonialist movement in the late 1950s and early 1960s.] The Rome Platform focused on these two fronts, the FIS and the FLN. The bishops’ friends were the people in between, people at the grassroots, small parties, people

building democracy. If you play this game [with the two fronts], you forget everyone else. It's like Bush and bin-Laden, the one responding to the other. In between there are many people who trying to live together in another way. The democratic movements in Algeria were very upset with this conference taking place.

The bishops felt they had the clear support of the Holy See?

I think so. I don't know the details about the Secretariat of State and the pope, so maybe Tincq has special information about it. At least I know that Archbishop Tessier met the pope several times during this period, and the pope was very supportive to him and to them.

Claverie said he in 1995 that he had chosen to stay in order not to abandon Algeria to the Islamists. More than ten years after his death, in fact the Islamists have not come to power. Do you think Claverie's death had any impact on that?

I think so, but because he's not alone in standing like that. He was standing with other people, representatives of civil society. He didn't do it by himself, but it was Claverie with the other leaders, other activists, who had an impact. It is strange, but Algerians can vote for the Islamists and at the same time they're for an open-minded society. They want to keep going to Europe, and they'll welcome you very warmly. There's something strange there. The ideology doesn't fit with what they are in fact.

Algeria was the first of the great anti-colonial movements. Does that legacy still affect things in the country?

That was more true in the time of Boumédiène, and as you know Bouteflika was his foreign minister. They were key figures, for example at the UN during negotiations about the price of raw materials in 1975. At that stage, Algeria felt that it was a country of leadership. But what happened afterwards has wounded the society deeply, and in some ways they are depressed about themselves. There is a comedian who says *Nous sommes Algér-rien*, a play on words, because *rien* means "nothing." At one stage the president of the country was named Liamine Zérual, and the joke was, "We are the first country in the world where the name of the president starts with 'zero.'" There is a kind of feeling of failure, because they had big dreams in the 1970s. I was there at that time. There was going to be a new economic model, a society a bit like Cuba at one stage, with a high level of education. All that has failed. Because of oil it's a very wealthy country, but at the same time not so developed.

Does Algeria's history as the first colonized nation to stand up to the West make it more difficult for the country now to adopt Western political models? In other words, beyond the Islamists, is there also still a revolutionary legacy that makes Claverie's dream difficult to realize?

Yes, this is why we keep having in Algerian politics quite tough, even xenophobic, trends. Arguing, for example, about the colonial times, what France did to us. These days, there are Algerians who want some kind of repentance from France. But I think it's just a little part of the establishment that wants this. The Algerian people are very easy-going people. They know they had a war, but it's the past and they want to live together. So many of them live in France, or their kids or their parents live in France. We have deep links.

You think in a free and fair election today, most Algerians would vote for a kind of liberal, tolerant state?

I think so, yes. I don't think they would vote for a strong Islamist state, or for this regime either. In the last elections, few people went to vote, which means they're not interested in the option proposed to them.

How well known is Bishop Claverie in Algeria today? Would the average Muslim selling newspapers or working in a bank know who he is?

I would say today that fewer know him than when he died, though I don't know. As I told you, when we organized this celebration last year, we thought it would be maybe 50 or 60 people. Instead, we had 400 people over two days, with panels, discussions, a movie, music. So maybe he's more known than I think.

But he wouldn't be considered a national hero?

Cardinal Duval was. He was there during the War of Liberation, and he was held up by the officials of the country as a real hero. Nobody can be like Duval. In some ways, Claverie was like a "little Duval." One day he stopped by a policeman on the road, because he was driving too fast. He said, 'I am the bishop of Oran,' to which the policeman responded, 'Ah, you are the Duval of Oran.'

I want to ask you two hypothetical questions, about how Bishop Claverie might have reacted to things that happened after his death. First, the U.S.-led war in Iraq. What do you think he would have made of it?

I think he would have spoken very clearly against the war, and in favor of mediation, discussion.

But he was also very much a realist in terms of Islamic terrorism.

Yes, but what is the war in Iraq really about? It has been established that there were no links between the Iraqi regime and Al-Qaeda.

But what about the broader idea of using military force to combat terrorism?

Evidently, it doesn't work. I don't think he would approve that. His message, I think, is first, talk to people. Then, he would say, 'I prefer to give my life rather than being part of the conflict.'

But his criticism of the Rome platform was precisely that it included the terrorists without insisting that they renounce violence, so he was not naïve about the threat that Islamism poses. What do you think he would say we should do about it?

We should talk. We should talk more, negotiate more.

Yet he was opposed to negotiating with the terrorists.

Yes, but the terrorists are not the whole picture. It's difficult to say, because the situation we have now is not the same as in his time. It has deteriorated a lot, mainly because of this approach which has responded to violence by violence. The war against the 'Axis of Evil.' What is that? Let's talk to real people, let's negotiate. Now in Iran, we have to explore ways of negotiating, though it seems that some people have other projects. His idea was building bridges with real people, with civil society. Here we are talking about a high level of politics, which was not his level as a bishop.

Did he have contacts with the militants?

Yes, from time to time some of them would visit. I quote in the book one time he received a couple of very traditional ones, and he said, 'Oh, they are nice fellows.' But he was clever at the same time. When he arrived in Oran, the cathedral, which was truly too big for the Christians who were left, was at risk of being taken over by the Islamists. So, he had a quick talk with the Ministry of Culture, and within five days they made a deal for the cathedral to become a cultural center.

Are there any broader lessons from the life and witness of Bishop Claverie that can help the church in trying to frame the moral context for a proper response to terrorism?

I think his answer is that often we think there is no alternative to violence and conflict. I think his life is a way of saying, there is an alternative, there are other ways. You have to find them, maybe you have to build them, you have to build these bridges, but they do exist. Don't be naïve, but don't become trapped between these two alternatives – resignation or violence. Build together other paths, other ways.

Another hypothetical. How do you think Bishop Claverie would have responded to the Holy Father's lecture in Regensburg?

I don't know, but anybody who knows the context immediately understands that this quotation was not a good idea. It brings us back to the polemics of the Middle Ages, which are still in the minds of many people. In some ways, it seems that this lecture was not read beforehand by any specialist.

But in general, I think he would have said, 'Let us talk. Don't shout, let us talk.' We did that in Cairo, where we had a very good conversation afterwards with Muslim leaders. We know them and they know us, so we can rely on each other. The problem is when people don't know each other, then it becomes an ideological debate. Who is 'the other'? You've never met him. I always say to people, 'Do you have a Muslim friend? Start with that, and then we'll talk.' A personal Muslim friend.

In Cairo, do you have any contacts with the Muslim Brotherhood?

They come to work at our library sometimes, we meet a few of them. In some ways because they want to come to power, they are open to discussion. They are more open to discussion than the traditional Muslim scholars who are in their old world of repeating their theology, their philosophy. Those Muslim Brothers want to be understood, so they talk with you. They are open to discussion.

Concretely, for leaders in the church today trying to figure out what to do about a clash between the West and the Islamic world, would the example of Claverie be that the best thing to do is to make a Muslim friend?

I think so. To dare to meet the other, to live with him, to explore the richness of the diversity.

You write in your book that at one point Claverie said he was favorably impressed by the theology of Jacques Dupuis. Do you think he would have recognized him in Dupuis' thinking?

He was not a professional theologian himself, though he read a lot. I think what he would say is that we do need a theology of pluralism, of diversity of religions. We don't have enough theological reflection on what it means to have a Muslim faith, Hindu faith, Buddhist faith, and so on. We need to work more on this issue.

But in the debate, for example, between an 'inclusivist' and 'pluralist' position, as theologians define those terms, he wouldn't have any particular stance?

I don't think so, not really. In some ways, he didn't address the theological questions very much. He was more a kind of witness, somebody who showed by his life, his way of being, the possibility of being together. He doesn't give the theological answers.

Would it be fair to say that Dupuis represents a theological version of the pastoral instinct that drove Claverie?

I think Claverie knew Claude Geffré better, a French theologian. He works in the same area as Dupuis, though he doesn't agree with him always. In some ways, Geffré is less affirmative than Dupuis. But Claverie would certainly have agreed with people who are looking for a real status for the other, not only saying that they have some good elements of our faith, which is the right one.

So he would have agreed that other religions have a positive role in salvation history?

Sure, that is written in *Nostra Aetate* from Vatican II.

Who were Claverie's closest friends?

He knew many people. I was amazed by that. Since he was a young priest in Algiers, he had many contacts. He was a man who loved to go with people, to meet them. Archbishop Tessier does that as well. So he would accept many invitations for social occasions, different events, a group starting a project. There was a little circle around him, but he had very broad contacts. He had very good friends, for example, in the universities. He was invited several times to lecture in local universities, and people were very impressed to see this priest, this bishop, able to talk in the area of social sciences.

He was completely comfortable and fluent in Arabic?

Yes, he was. He wrote little articles in Arabic and so on. He taught Arabic in the early 1970s in the center run by Tessier. His students included people with high positions, the wives of ministers and people like that. He even said that one of them had been involved in the anti-colonial war, placing bombs. He said, 'Oh, what a shock. I discovered them, and I discovered that we could be friends.'

Among his Arab friends, are their people whose hearts and minds were really changed by Claverie?

Definitely. When we had this meeting last year, it was amazing to see how many people were thinking of him, showing us the letters they got from him. ... I met an Algerian economist, for example. At the celebration, we had a spiritual evening. We couldn't say that it was a religious event, but it was a spiritual evening in the basement of the cathedral where he's buried. We had two choirs, one a Sufi group from Algeria and another of black African students from Taizé. They sung in Arabic and French, and there were also pictures of Claverie and readings from his texts. At the end, we all went with candles to Pierre's tomb. I found myself with a very famous Algerian economist, a Muslim. I asked him, 'What are you doing here?' He said that, 'Pierre is not only yours. He was the bishop of Oran, of all of us.'

How did Claverie feel about prayer with Muslims? Would he do it?

I don't think so, because in dialogue you have to have clear identities. I don't think he would be a man to say, 'We can mix everything.' He would say, 'I respect their prayer, they pray for me and I pray for them, but each of us has our own tradition.'

You tell a story in your book about a Muslim who was visiting Claverie, who said he had to leave in order to make it home in time to say his prayers. Claverie insisted that he stay, telling him that he could say his prayers in the bishop's house.

He even told him, 'It is an honor for me today that you are praying in my home.' He was not praying with him, but he was acknowledging the possibility of somebody else having a real prayer before God.

Claverie managed to combine strong identity and radical openness.

He was a unique witness to this.

Do you see evidence of growing interest in the life of Bishop Claverie?

I have given maybe 80 lectures after this book. I thought at one stage it was over, but after two or three years people keep asking. The message always goes through very well, very easily. I had this experience here in Louisville last week, in Toronto. It's amazing how powerful it is. It's not an ideological approach, it's a human-based and personal approach.

It also doesn't get caught up in theological debates in the church.

He was very clever in this regard!