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# aim usa

The United States Secretariat of the Alliance for International Monasticism

[www.aim-usa.org](http://www.aim-usa.org)

Volume 34 No. 2 2025

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# Emmanuel-God with us...

Our faith proclaims Emmanuel-God with Us as we celebrate the Birth of Christ. Emmanuel gives us strength for the journey. We are mindful of monastics living in the midst of violence and war today and in the past. We hold them in prayer as well as commemorate the 30<sup>th</sup> death anniversary of the monks of Tibhirine. Articles have been edited by AIM USA staff with permission of the authors.

## At the Same Table with Death

Those who remain here in Ukraine choose to live side by side with death. Every day we are confronted with an awareness of its approach. In the monastic tradition there is a call to be conscious of life's end—especially when death becomes unpredictable, when it may arrive suddenly. In his Rule (RB 4:47), Benedict advises monks always to keep the moment of death before their eyes.



We encounter death in the many reports of missile strikes and the loss of lives. From the news feed: a seven year old boy, pulseless, is being pulled from under rubble after a bombardment. Meanwhile, his father, recently released after four years of captivity, is fighting for his life in a hospital. Such scenes have become part of our daily existence. When we hear the drone of rockets or UAVs, we realize someone's death is flying overhead—perhaps ours.

In every city, even in peaceful regions, there is no absolute safety. Sisters in Lviv recently shook with fear at explosions and the sounds of air defenses, though the city hosts refugees from frontline areas. Co-existing with suffering and death demands a greater level of spiritual endurance and a clear perception of reality. We analyze life most deeply precisely when we lose someone, because death becomes like a test of life. Sometimes, those who fear death the most are, in fact, afraid of living. Perhaps experiencing the nearness of death makes us live more intensely, for death is what awakens us.

Acceptance of death as an inseparable part of life is a central theme in many religious and philosophical traditions; for us, however, it

is a choice. Many young men at the prime of their lives, defending their country, understood that this path would be irreversible for many. They knew this was a conscious end of life—that there would be no more dreams, no old age. To set out on that road is almost like saying: “Tomorrow I will meet death.” In an interview one of our dear military acquaintances said: “It doesn't matter how long you live, what matters is how.” He died a month after the video was recorded. A year later his body was returned. Sisters took part in his funeral because he grew up by the monastery. A profound saying by Dag Hammarskjöld: “Once Death was part of the company. Now it sits at my table. I must become its friend.” This expresses our acceptance of death not as an enemy, but as part of our life—something we must learn to live with, and as the road that leads us, in the Lord's time, to the Resurrection; to live as one who “waits on the Lord.” (Ps 37:7)

Sister Maria Liudmyla Kukharyk, OSB  
Abbey of the Immaculate Conception  
Zhytomyr, Ukraine



## On the Cover

“At the center of the scene is the Holy Family: Mary, with a great heart (her dress is red and shaped like a heart), gives us Jesus, whose face is turned to us. Little Jesus is giving us a blessing. He extends his hand toward us, as if reaching out, and blesses us right away. There is a radiant light and angels descending from heaven, adoring the mystery of the Incarnation.

There is also a Ukrainian mother with two small children. The mother is carrying a large backpack—a “go bag,” as every Ukrainian has, holding documents and a few essential items to take in times of danger. On the left, a broken viburnum

branch—a symbol of today's Ukraine—still bears fruit, and beneath it, fire represents the war.

Yet this fire and darkness only remain at the bottom of the image. The radiance from heaven and the Holy Family at the center surpass the pain and the night—it is a sign of hope that good always triumphs, that the Incarnation of God brings us faith and the assurance that God is always with us.” (Sister Ester Okhramovych, OSB, artist). Immaculate Conception Abbey, Zhytomyr, Ukraine

# strength for the Journey

## A Commemoration

On May 8, 2026 the Cistercian Order will commemorate the 30<sup>th</sup> death anniversary of the monks of Tibhirine.



The monks of Tibhirine were seven Trappist monks from Our Lady of Atlas Abbey in Algeria, who were kidnapped during the Algerian Civil War on March 26-27, 1996. They were held captive for two months and were later found dead on May 21, 1996.

The circumstances of their kidnapping and death remain controversial with the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) claiming responsibility, while general Francois Buchwalter later reported that they were killed by the Algerian Army.

The monks were martyrs, and their remains were buried in the cemetery of their monastery, which continues to be a site of remembrance for their sacrifice and the ongoing conflicts in Algeria.

## Resources

**Film:** Of Gods and Men

**Books:** How Far To Follow  
by Bernardo Olivera, OCSO

The Last Monk of Tibhirine  
by Freddy Derwall

God For All Days- The Final Monastic Chapters  
of Christian De Chergé,  
Translated by Jennifer Rushworth

## From the monks

“We have to be witness of the Emmanuel”, that is of “God with us.” There is a presence of “God among men” which we ourselves must assume. It is in this perspective that we understand our vocation to be a fraternal presence of men and women who share the life of Muslims, of Algerians, in prayer, silence and friendship. Church-Islam relations are still stammering because we have not yet lived side by side with them enough.”

**Father Christian de Chergé, OCSO**  
reflections for Lent on March 8, 1996

Christmas 1995 arrived. Christopher had made a creche out of cashabia (a camel-hair tunic with a large hood) of Henri Verges, who had been assassinated the year before. Christopher turned the hood into a cave, in which he put the little statues of the Holy Family. The symbolism was both eloquent and heart-rending. Christopher comments on it in his diary.

“Behold the Lamb. He is here. Soon comes the marriage. In the folds of a cashabia—stronger than murder—it is he, born in the midst of us to be offered in our lives. The new life of this Child is stronger than any assassination and death.”

**Father Christopher Lebreton, OCSO**

## Mass Offerings

**AIM USA** sends **MASS OFFERINGS** to Benedictine and Cistercian monasteries in Asia, Africa, Latin America the Caribbean and Eastern Europe. These offerings are extremely important to them, especially in these times. If you wish to remember someone who has died or is in need of healing or have another intention, please send it to:

**AIM USA**  
345 East Ninth Street  
Erie PA 16503 USA

# Emmanuel-God with us...

## Testament of Dom Christian de Chergé

(opened on Pentecost Sunday, May 26, 1996)

### *Facing a GOOD-BYE....*

If it should happen one day - and it could be today - that I become a victim of the terrorism which now seems ready to engulf all the foreigners living in Algeria, I would like my community, my Church and my family to remember that my life was GIVEN to God and to this country.

I ask them to accept the fact that the One Master of all life was not a stranger to this brutal departure.

I would ask them to pray for me: for how could I be found worthy of such an offering?

I ask them to associate this death with so many other equally violent ones which are forgotten through indifference or anonymity.

My life has no more value than any other.

Nor any less value.

In any case, it has not the innocence of childhood.

I have lived long enough to know that I am an accomplice in the evil which seems to prevail so terribly in the world, even in the evil which might blindly strike me down.

I should like, when the time comes, to have a moment of spiritual clarity which would allow me to beg forgiveness of God and of my fellow human beings, and at the same time forgive with all my heart the one who would strike me down.

I could not desire such a death.

It seems to me important to state this.

I do not see, in fact, how I could rejoice if the people I love were indiscriminately accused of my murder.

It would be too high a price to pay for what will perhaps be called, the "grace of martyrdom" to owe it to an Algerian, whoever he might be, especially if he says he is acting in fidelity to what he believes to be Islam.

I am aware of the scorn which can be heaped on the Algerians indiscriminately.

I am also aware of the caricatures of Islam which a certain Islamism fosters.

It is too easy to soothe one's conscience by identifying this religious way with the fundamentalist ideology of its extremists.

For me, Algeria and Islam are something different: it is a body and a soul.

I have proclaimed this often enough, I think, in the light of what I have received from it.

I so often find there that true strand of the Gospel which I learned at my mother's knee, my very first Church, precisely in Algeria, and already inspired with respect for Muslim believers.

Obviously, my death will appear to confirm those who hastily judged me naïve or idealistic:

"Let him tell us now what he thinks of his ideals!"

But these persons should know that finally my most avid curiosity will be set free.

This is what I shall be able to do, God willing: immerse my gaze in that of the Father to contemplate with him His children of Islam just as He sees them, all shining with the glory of Christ, the fruit of His Passion, filled with the Gift of the Spirit whose secret joy will always be to establish communion and restore the likeness, playing with the differences.



*Dom Christian de Chergé*

For this life lost, totally mine and totally theirs, I thank God, who seems to have willed it entirely for the sake of that JOY in everything and in spite of everything.

In this THANK YOU, which is said for everything in my life from now on, I certainly include you, friends of yesterday and today, and you, my friends of this place, along with my mother and father, my sisters and brothers and their families. You are the hundredfold granted as was promised!

And also you, my last-minute friend, who will not have known what you were doing: Yes, I want this THANK YOU and this GOOD-BYE to be a "GOD-BLESS" for you, too, because in God's face I see yours.

May we meet again as happy thieves in Paradise, if it please God, the Father of us both.

**AMEN ! INCHALLAH !**

Algiers, 1<sup>st</sup> December 1993

Tibhirine, 1<sup>st</sup> January 1994

*Christian +*

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# strength for the Journey

## Faith in the Face of Persecution

### - a brief reflection on the last Testament of Christian de Chergé

The longer I am in religious life, the older I get, the more I stand in awe in front of the profound mystery of God's plan, not only for the world but particularly for myself. When I was young, with a great passion to follow Christ, to live for God alone, to leave behind everything, I offered myself to be consecrated by God in the form of monastic life, undoubtedly with the empowerment of superabundant grace; and I gave myself totally. It was free, genuine, and solemn. But time and again, I am confronted by what the vows mean and what it takes.

"If only one day, and it could even be today..." This thought did not even cross my mind. The determination and perseverance were the focus, not the *what-ifs*. I had no idea what life would bring yet, or how circumstances could change - politically, socially, and culturally.... even persons, even myself. But that "if only one day" really came, one after another. At first, I was utterly unprepared. It stirred up waves big and small in a heart that I thought had been stabilized. Some *ifs* were more predictable, and they could be handled by more intensive prayer, penance, and offering. Yet, some can really disturb the stability of the heart like a storm.

You never know, one day the place in which you live changes

overnight, and the voice of freedom and human rights is henceforth silenced, or a superior who falls into the vice of favoritism or authoritarianism. Also, fanaticism of all kinds. Injustice and the threat of persecution may come in various forms, whether it be in the macro or micro society. Is the resolution simply to go away? But must the decision to remain be crowned heroism or martyrdom? Experience, by which we learn with the aid of the spirit of the vows, clarifies our concepts and purifies our intentions, until we come to the insight that we are "*no less and no more than any other lives*". Also, there exist millions equally suffering and worth remembering as much as I am.

Let us hope and pray with Fr. Christian and his companions that at the very moment the *flash of lucidity* of Christ on the cross also shines in our heart, that we see what He sees, we forgive how He forgives. All are equally children of God. We all, at times, do not know what we are doing. We give thanks to God for our neighbors, whom we hope to meet in heaven. Amen.

Anastasius LI, OCSO  
Procurator General  
Rome, Italy

## Faith working through Love

### "The Order needs monks not martyrs."



Such was the counsel of the Abbot General of the Cistercian Trappist Order, Bernardo Olivera, to the monks of Tibhirine sometime after the visit of the six armed men of the GIA on Christmas eve, 1993. The GIA was an armed group fighting against the government of Algeria and they had come to demand the monks' collaboration in terms of medical, economic and logistic aid. Dom

Bernardo wanted to make sure that the monks' response was not a political one, but one that flowed from the depths of their faith and of their monastic commitment. Through many community meetings and tense discussions, the monks became clear on **what** they would do and **why** they would do it.

Obviously, each of them embraced these decisions in their own individual ways and with differing emphasis and conviction. But as a true brotherhood living by koinonia with the love of Christ as their lodestar, they chose:

- To stay in Algeria because their very monastic consecration had made these people their own people. To abandon them now would be to deny the call of God in their lives.
- To refuse any collaboration, with the possible exception of

medical aid within the monastery, because their call was not to choose sides but to be a reconciling presence among **all** people of Algeria.

- To accept the possibility of a violent death while they themselves prayed to be totally disarmed of all violence towards others so that others could find the courage to disarm themselves. As Father Christian prayed: Lord disarm me and disarm them.
- To beg forgiveness from God for those who might harm or even kill them because only forgiveness can break the chains of hatred and violence. Forgiveness would allow them to be faithful witnesses to the love which is the heart of the Gospel and not witness to any political agenda.
- To refuse to accuse anyone, even those who might wield the sword against them, but to hope that we may all meet again as happy thieves in paradise.

None of these were easy choices. But they fulfilled Dom Bernardo's counsel in a paradoxical way: they became true monks of the Order for their violent Martyrdom flowed from their testimony that they preferred nothing whatever to the love of Christ as Saint Benedict prescribed.

Father Stan Gumula, OCSO  
monk of Mepkin Abbey serving in  
Esmeraldas, Ecuador

# Emmanuel-God with us...

## Remaining with our People



*Fons Pacis, Syria Community*

“Always having death before your eyes.” During many years of war, the prospect of death accompanied the daily lives of Syrians, the awareness, when leaving home, of not knowing if they would return. It was not uncommon for those who went to work in the morning, after parking their cars, to call their children: “If anything happens to me, I left the car there, the keys are hidden there.” The prospect of the death of relatives, friends, neighbors...every day, someone we knew left us. But despite the violence and suffering, the force of life almost never failed, the hope that all this would end and we would see better days. Today, fewer people are dying (unless they belong to the “wrong” part of the population, to one of the minorities such as those living in our areas, who have suffered a veritable massacre). But everyone, in general, lives in anxiety, in uncertainty; many in fear. It is not clear in which socio-political direction Syria is heading: Fragmentation? Radicalization? It is impossible to have hope for a possible future, impossible to imagine tomorrow... poverty, lack of work, insecurity. A palpable weariness weighs on everyone’s life, whatever group they belong to. And once again, the desire is to leave, to get away, as soon as a way is found.

This death of the heart is more difficult to deal with because it is darker; because it asks us to go deeper, to seek the meaning of suffering, of pain, the very meaning of existence. It asks us Christians to truly seek Christ. To be in Him. Not as a consolation, but as the One in whom we find true Life, which nothing can take away from us. It is not a matter of finding easy answers or solutions—which is impossible anyway—but of remaining and rooting ourselves where truth and hope are not words but a Person who is among us. Simply remaining: it may seem absurd, but one of the dimensions of our Benedictine Rule that most sustains

us in this time of uncertainty is the “*stabilitas loci*,” our vow of stability. Remaining with our people, remaining in communion with one another, remaining above all in the presence of God, praying for all his children, whom He certainly loves without distinction... Remaining attentive to the gifts of his grace, which never fail. Everything becomes more essential, even prayer. The Psalms take on a different depth, the Word brings a Presence alive among us, the Eucharist helps us to remain grateful for the Life we receive and which never runs out, like the widow’s oil; oil that soothes, heals, and consecrates every suffering and every grace.

Sister Marta Luisa Fagnani, OSB  
Fons Pacis Monastery  
Azeir, Syria



*Fons Pacis Monastery, Syria*

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# strength for the Journey

## Keep death before your eyes...in the midst of war?

In RB 4:47, Saint Benedict asks monks to “keep the threat of death before their eyes every day.” This attitude disposes us to live under God’s gaze in order to avoid sin. It also prepares us to welcome death as an imminent possibility. This disposition of soul is more than necessary in times of war. Indeed, in times of armed conflict, death can occur at any time in heavily affected areas. Having death before our eyes every day allows everyone, Christians and non-Christians alike, to practice living daily with the awareness that at any moment, they may pass from life to death. Having death before our eyes is an attitude of vigilance that characterizes monks. But it becomes the attitude of every person living in times of war. It disposes us to live in such a way as to avoid sin so that after our death we may be welcomed by the Lord into his Kingdom. This is where Jesus’ words take on their full meaning: “Be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect” (Lk 12:40).

Following Christ, St. Paul makes us more aware that death comes like a thief in the night (cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:2). So, as children of light, we must live with the keen awareness that our encounter with the Lord can happen at any moment.

Located about 30 kilometers south of Ouagadougou, Koubri, Abbey Saint Benoit, is currently enjoying a period of calm and peace. However, a few sites for internally displaced persons and news from areas under attack remind us that the country is experiencing a tragedy unlike anything it has ever seen before. We pray to God to protect us from this calamity and to put a definitive end to the attacks.

In the current context, we live in hope. Yes, we have a strong hope that one day this will all come to an end. The resurrection of Jesus marked Christ’s victory over evil. We have faith that this unjust war will not have the last word. We have faith that one day our country will regain its former peace.

With perseverance, we pray daily for the advent of true and lasting peace. Prayer opens us to compassion. While continually offering to God the suffering of so many men and women, young people and children reduced to poverty, we come to their aid as best we can.

Abbot Jean-Christophe Yameogo, OSB  
Abbaye Saint Benoit de Koubri  
Burkino Fasa, West Africa

## Annual Board Meeting



Many thanks to Fr. Macario Martinez, OSB for hosting the Board meeting of the US Secretariat of the Alliance for International Monasticism at Saint Benedict’s Abbey, Benet Lake, Wisconsin on August 2, 2025.

Board members attending were:

ROW 1-left to right: Bishop Elias Lorenzo, OSB, St. Teresa of Avila Parish, Summit, NJ; Sr. Nettie Gamble, OCSO, Our Lady of the Mississippi Abbey, Dubuque, IA; Sr. Susan Quaintance, OSB,

St. Scholastica Monastery, Chicago, IL; Sr. Chris Kosin, OSB, Mt. St. Benedict Monastery, Erie, PA; Sr. Ann Hoffman, OSB, Mt. St. Benedict Monastery, Erie, PA; Sr. Kathy Ulrich, OCSO, Our Lady of the Angels Monastery, Crozet, VA; ROW 2-Fr. Anastasius Reiser, OSB, Christ the King Priory, Schuyler, NE; Fr. Macario Martinez, OSB, St. Benedict’s Abbey, Benet lake, WI; Sr. Jennifer Mechtilde Horner, OSB, Our Lady of Grace Monastery, Beech Grove, IN; Sr. Dianne Sabol, OSB, Mt. St. Benedict Monastery, Erie, PA; Fr. Augustine Kelly, OSB, St. Anselm Abbey, Manchester, NH. Sr. Diane Rabe, OSB, Mt. St. Benedict Monastery, Erie, PA (ex-officio) attended by zoom. Sr. Mariana Olivo Espinosza, OSB, Pan

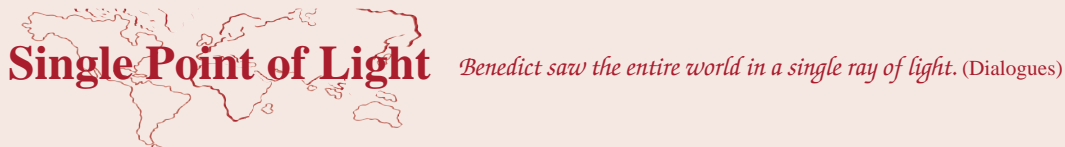
de Vida Monastery, Torreon, Mexico was unable to attend. Staff members from Mt. St. Benedict Monastery, Erie, PA. included Sr. Ann Hoffman, OSB, Director, Sr. Chris Kosin, OSB and Sr. Dianne Sabol, OSB.

The Board reviewed reports and discussed the future of AIM USA, its mission and structure.

We are sincerely grateful to the Board members for their shared wisdom and commitment to AIM USA.



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***We hold in our hearts...***the wonder of Christmas and the gift of Emmanuel---God with us.

***We hold in our hearts...***the death of our brother monks in Tibhirine 30 years ago.

***We hold in our hearts...***our sisters and brothers all over the world who suffer from oppression and war  
...and our communities of Benedictines and Cistercians who live and minister in the midst of this suffering.

***We hold in our hearts...***the member monasteries of AIM USA and those who faithfully support our mission.

***And so,***

....as we celebrate the gift of Emmanuel,

....as we come to the close of the Jubilee Year, *Pilgrims of Hope*,

***let us commit ourselves to***

***HAVE HOPE*** in our hearts,

***BE HOPE*** in our daily lives,

and ***BRING HOPE*** to everyone we meet.

*Sister Ann Hoffman, OSB*

Sister Ann Hoffman, OSB, Executive Director, AIM USA  
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