

“Peace I bequeath to you, my own peace I give you, a peace the world cannot give, this is my gift to you.”

On 23 May 1996, a radio newsreader in Algeria announced the receipt of a message from the GIA, a militant Islamist group of terrorists and guerrillas, who two months earlier had abducted seven Cistercian monks from their monastery in the Atlas mountains. The message stated that negotiations with the authorities over the release of the seven monks had broken down. The statement concluded with the chilling sentence, “We have cut the throats of the seven monks.”

Peace I bequeath to you...

What is astounding about the martyrdom of these monks is that deep sense of peace that seemed to possess them from the very moment they first realised what was likely to happen to them. In the face of the growing Islamist threat, they all had the opportunity of returning to the safety of France. Instead, they decided to stay.

Peace I bequeath to you....

Having made their decision to abide by their vow of stability, even in the face of violence, the Prior, Brother Christian wrote this: “There was among us a new quality of harmony and mutual acceptance. We’d achieved a greater capacity to listen....Afterwards we had a strong feeling of having been inspired and, as it were, accompanied. The danger is there every day, everywhere. Each one knows this, feels this, for himself and for the whole environment in which we are living. The action of grace is **also** there every day.

On the Feast of the Annunciation, Monday 25 March, or to be more precise, in the early hours of the following night, the monastery was broken into by a group of Islamists. Brother Christian and six of his monks were taken away, never to be seen again.

A month later, an audio-tape was delivered to the French Embassy in Algiers, It contained this message: “This is Brother Christian, son of Monique and Guy de Chergé, aged 59, monk of the monastery of Tibhirine and prior of the community. Today is Saturday 20 April, and it is 11.00pm.” What is so striking about the message was the calmness and the peacefulness of his voice. The message went on, “We are informing you that we are being held as hostages, alive and in good health, by the GIA fighters. They are holding us as hostages, and they demand that the French government release a certain number of hostages belonging to the group in exchange for our freedom. This exchange offer would appear to be non-negotiable.”

Peace I bequeath you....

This calmness, this peace, this joy, can be, and will be ours. We receive this peace, we enter this peace, the moment that we accept God’s will, the moment we take upon ourselves the discipline of Christ, the moment that we really start to pray.

Peace I bequeath you....

And may Our Lady, Queen of Peace pray for us, for our church and for our world. May each one of us find our true home in the love and peace of Christ. Amen. Inshallah.

Fr Michael