

**ECUMENICAL MINISTRY & THE
LITTLE SISTERS OF JESUS**

2 Bd. Abbane Ramdane
31024 Oran, Algeria
October 1988

Dear Friends:

YES, of course we did mean to write earlier! We just hope now that this letter can make it through the various processes to reach you by Christmas or the beginning of the new year. In any case, we wish you all a happy Halloween, a thanks-filled Thanksgiving, a Christ-centered Christmas and a new year in which you feel yourselves renewed in reconciliation with God and neighbor.

Once again our week of prayer for unity (January 18-25) stretched over three months so that David, the only Protestant pastor in western Algeria, could preach at mass in a maximum number of places from the local cathedral to a city four hours away.

How can we have Protestant services here and preach at 10 masses in the same three months? As you may recall, the weekend here is Thursday afternoon and Friday; and for twelve years now, students from other parts of Africa and Madagascar have made up an important part of our small group. Since they nearly all live at the edge of the city (or even outside of it) and have transportation problems, we have fixed our meeting times to suit them best. Hence most of our meetings are on Thursday, either afternoon or evening, and occasionally on Friday morning. The Catholic services, on the other hand, are almost always celebrated on Sunday evening after work hours. That schedule would not suit our students at all but suits us all the better for going to visit the Catholic parishes.

Also in the context of the "week" of prayer for unity, David was asked to write the editorial in the January issue of the Catholic diocesan bulletin; and we were again invited to spend more time with the Little Sisters of Jesus at the northern edge of the Sahara, where there is one group among the nomads and another in a town. This was the third year in a row for such a visit.

This group is the order of Catholic nuns in which there are three or four Protestants. One of them is a Swiss woman doctor who was one of our "parishioners" in the nomad group about eight-ten years ago. She is now working among the lepers in India. A few years ago, a German Lutheran came to the same nomad group to become our "Protestant parishioner" among them. So we must at least make an annual pastoral call on Little Sister Doris.

It is hardly an ordinary pastoral call, however. We are invited as a pastoral couple to visit the whole group at the tent and also the group in town some 10-15 miles away (1/2-2/3 via trails off the main road). Besides the day's drive from Oran and the day's drive back, we try to spend two or three days at the tent (as well as the two evenings coming and going spent with the group in town) so as to share a bit of their nomad life, greet the folk in the neighboring tents and still have time for several sessions of sharing together. Last year our theme was the eucharist or communion in our Protestant and Catholic traditions. This year we centered our discussions around the different understandings of sainthood in general and of Mary in particular. Both times we shared communion together.

This year's visit to the tent was quite remarkable for an odd statistic; in the context of the Little Sisters of Jesus, the Protestants outnumbered the Catholics 2 to 1 (precisely 4 to 2). This year there were only 4 sisters at the tent and one of them was a Danish Lutheran on a three-month leave from her post in Copenhagen. She had chosen to spend her leave in Algeria and especially with Doris. Our "pastoral call" was timed to coincide with the end of her stay there. We brought her back to Oran as the first leg of her trip home. During our short visit with the group in town (two Little Brothers of Jesus as well as the sisters), we were duly restored to our minority status—but only numerically, since our fellowship in Christ is truly one of brothers and sisters and banishes any feeling of being a minority. In our relationships here, that is an experienced fact and not mere theory!

The Little Sisters of Jesus have as their main calling to live among the poor and the outcasts of society. There is a small group in the slums of Chicago, where one of them was killed by a stray bullet a few years ago. Wherever they are, their role is to maintain a Christian presence of loving friendship and solidarity as well as prayer. The nomad group is in a small community of eight to ten tents that sometimes split into sub-groups. The sisters move with their closest nomad family. Actually, it is a semi-nomadic group sometimes moving only twice in a year and generally staying in the same valley. With many years of over-grazing by the herds of the whole area and mostly years of drought since 1980-81, their plight has become dramatic. The numbers of these semi nomads have already been quite reduced as more and more drift off to the sedentary life. The life style that is so dear to them cannot be sustained for long by very many of them. The remaining ones can find very little firewood and are already largely dependent on bottled gas. They are also the poor who have no camels (only donkeys besides their sheep and goats), so pick-up trucks are required to help them move. Such non-nomadic requirements are costly.

This year the drought was particularly devastating. They were being forced to buy oats in town at high and rising prices and transport it by pick-up truck to keep their flocks going. Then they learned that, by a quirk of nature, an area some 60 miles south of them had received unusual rains transforming a bit of desert into a lush pasture that no no nomads were exploiting. Why not rush at once to the new pasture? Their great hesitation was based on the lack of any source of drinking water anywhere in that temporarily lush region. They would have to pay for the transporting of drinking water from the town. They finally sent off nearly all the men and the boys in their late teens with most of the sheep to survive there as best they could. The others stayed behind with the goats and more fragile sheep. Such was the situation at the time of our visit.

Then came the month of Ramadan (mid-April to mid-May this year). It is the Muslim month of fasting based on a lunar calendar about 10-11 days shorter than our solar one. From sunrise to sunset, the faithful are not supposed to eat OR TO DRINK. For people living and working outside in a hot climate, that is a harsh ordeal. So every evening becomes a family festival. For the families to remain separated at that time seemed unbearable. Some moved south to the unusual Saharan pasture...but not for long. With no more rain and lots of sun, the pasture began drying up...and then the locusts came. We will close with a free translation of a note from little Sister Doris written near the end of that experience. We think it carries the ultimate message of Christmas...God's bottom line.

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Oct. 88

6 miles south of El Abiodh (They are normally 10-15 miles NW
of town.) May 9, 1988

Dear David & Carol:

Your precious visit here already seems so far away—your departure and that of Lizbeth (the Danish Lutheran) seems more than a year ago, so many things have happened since. Locusts, which you saw (and tasted) in the village, have literally eaten up the countryside—grass, flowers, everything.

Maundy Thursday we went with two of our nomad families 50 miles south of town into the beginning of the vast Sahara, where (most exceptional) the pasture was better—but NO water. It had to be brought in by truck and cost us dearly. Then winds came blowing sand and dried everything up. Little by little we've been moving back north—seven moves in five weeks! Take the tent down, pack everything in bags, put it on the truck, take it off the truck, put up the tent, etc., etc.—and with just three of us to do it because Louise Berthe has had to give up the nomad life due to her knees. And it's Ramadan—everybody is worn out.

This morning a young shepherd went to sleep and the flock wandered off. Two consecutive days, we'd moved. He'd walked 30-35 miles in the two days with his flock—fasting—under a burning sun.

Everybody's completely exhausted—and also worried about the future as there just is no pasture anywhere. Sometimes we stop in some of the most incredible places—like, since yesterday, we're six miles south of El Abiodh and just a half mile from the city dump. We've been completely overrun by flies. In another camp site, we were invaded by locusts. They came out of the ground just in front of our tent one morning—and they jumped everywhere—in the bread we were kneading, in the soup, all over us. And winds have been blowing sand every day. But behold, we are still alive! Sometimes we wonder what we're doing here. But here we are, poor—sometimes VERY poor and a little tired of it all—but here because of God's great love, freely given. That's all.

I haven't forgotten you, even when I don't write much. The tea you brought us has helped us any number of times to keep a clearer head.

With Christ's peace,
Your Doris

And so we leave you with God's great love, freely given. That's all.

Most fraternally yours,

Doris