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31024 ORAN, ALGERIA
OCTOBER 1992

1992 UPDATE --

The Pilgrimage of Friendship

The Incredible Caper of the Butler Boys

Our Present Situation

Dear Friends,

This year, for a change, let us be among the EARLIER ones to send you Christmas and New Year's greetings. In the interim, may you also experience a most meaningful Thanksgiving. May the love of God in Christ be the source of your faith, hope and life not only on these special occasions but every day...and in all ways.

Most recent years in which we were not going to the States for the summer have found us combining vacation with a "Pilgrimage of Friendship" and extended pastoral ministry. This year we extended it to 6 weeks and roamed through much of France and southern England, managing to visit 20 families (or, in some cases, individuals) and contact others by phone. A few we had not seen since 1964 or '65, one family since 1979. The majority had been parishioners here in our Western Algeria parish, usually for a period of only 2-5 years. In southern France, quite literally on a mountain top, we met a lovely young family we had never met except for the wife and mother. She received the confirmation of her baptism here in 1980. Just by one day, we missed seeing her brother, who was confirmed here in 1979. Our very last visit, back in southern France again, was with a Catholic priest and a part of both his biological and spiritual families. He is a Little Brother of Jesus from the same town where we go each year to visit the Little Sisters of Jesus. It is among the latter that there have been two different Protestants. They were both in the sub-group living among the semi-nomads some 8 to 12 miles out of town. He was nearing the end of a year's treatment for a rather unusual disease in which the body's own enzymes eat away at various muscles and was doing daily walks of 10 miles in mountainous terrain but still having some pain in climbing stairs. Now he is back at work in Algeria. We earnestly hope and pray there will be no relapse.

A little over a year ago, in the States, the boys spoke to us in terms of finally coming to see us here in 1995 and helping us move back for our retirement. How could we possibly have suspected that a year earlier (1990) they had already set the target date of spring 1992 to carry out their Incredible Caper? In fact, the beginning goes back to 1984 when Jim, the youngest, came back for the last visit here. He had his instructions to get duplicates of all our keys without our knowing it. He succeeded. Since then, it has been a matter of finding a time when all four could be free enough from work and study and could get enough money to come. They set the time two years ahead so all could work and plan toward the common goal. Of course, we were to know nothing about it. Others on three continents knew about it long ago, but we remained in ignorant bliss. In any case, they figured that by 1992 only Jim would still be working on his doctorate and would not likely be under any great time pressure. As for money, they managed to save a lot by finding the cheapest air fares we have ever heard of for such a trip. Three cheers for Paul's travel agent.

As the time approached, they began to realize that we might have changed some locks since 1984. In fact, they had no certainty that the most crucial key would do its work of opening the gate to the courtyard, giving access to the rest of the property. They felt they needed more accomplices and phoned our United Methodist colleague in Algiers. He phoned the Catholic bishop in Oran. When the latter heard of the plan to get us out of the house so the boys could settle into the living room for us to find them there on our return, he hesitated; "Do you think their hearts are strong enough to take it?" When assured we were in very good health (which he really knew already), he joined in with gusto. Since we at that time had no African students or others living with us in the church property that could serve as inside accomplices in the event [redacted] some of the keys would not work, the bishop had to solve that problem as well as manage to get us out of the house at the right time. His vicar general and another priest helped work out the details, involving others in the process.

The boys were due to arrive the evening of June 9, just a bit ahead of our wedding anniversary on June 12. We got a phone call from a new American Protestant couple in the oil "camp" (nice prefab housing) 25 miles east of us inviting us to dinner the evening of June 9. It was a very natural invitation since they had just recently said they wanted to have us for dinner some time soon. Then a friend from the town next to the oil complex phoned and asked if she could spend that night with us so she could see other friends west of Oran the next morning. That, too, seemed natural since she did have the 10th off work to make a three-day holiday weekend here. She arrived straight from work and then we left her on her own while we went out to dinner. Shortly thereafter, she let in the vicar general and went off to another friend's place near here to eat and spend the night. Two other men went to the airport to meet the boys. One of them, incidentally, works in the French consulate and had put off his vacation departure to France a few days to be able to help in the Incredible Caper of the Butler boys. We shall call him "EE."

CRISIS AND PANIC!! The boys were not on the plane! They were on supposedly connecting Air Algeria flights (London-Algiers-Oran) but the London flight was far too late. They spent the night with our colleagues in Algiers. Meanwhile, here in Oran, the two men returned to tell the vicar general that the boys had not arrived. What to do? All was open, they had no keys to close the house, the young lady who was to be sleeping in the living room had gone and we were due back in about an hour. The only solution seemed to be to get the girl back. They knew with whom she was staying but only knew approximately where that was. So, the vicar general had to knock at the door of other friends at 10 pm to get the exact address and get the girl back here. Our hosts were to keep us talking till 10:30 so we wouldn't be home before 11:00. We made their task easy, jabbering away till at least 11:00 and coming home slowly to arrive about 11:45. Our guest was asleep in the living room and then had breakfast with us as planned. Life was unsuspiciously normal.

The boys arrived around noon the next day and were met by the vicar general and EE. The former took three boys to the bishopric while the latter brought Jim to the lower part of our street. It was about 12:40. We wouldn't likely be in the street at that time and we couldn't see him from the house if he came up the street hugging the walls. It was a small risk to test the gate key. It worked...no need for an inside accomplice. Then it was back to the bishopric with his tale of success. Paul, the eldest, asked the bishop if he would be

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willing to play a key role in the new strategy. Rubbing his hands and with a glint in his eye, he asked enthusiastically, "What do I do?"

At 2 p.m. the bishop called and asked us both to come at once to get a letter he had received in English for us. "I can't make much out of it, but it concerns your boys," he said. Of course we would both come as quickly as possible. The boys came by a roundabout way to the bottom of our street, chauffeured by EE. There was no real danger of our paths crossing since we were a bit delayed. When they saw us leave in the car and disappear around the corner, they shifted into commando gear. The car doors flew open and all 4 jumped out and came running up the street, each with at least 1 key in hand. As one opened the gate, the others ran to open the other doors upstairs (apartment) and down (chapel, library and Black Hole). It was only the latter they could not enter. It is a very small two-room apartment where the boys slept and studied when they were here and where African students have often been since then. The boys dubbed it the Black Hole because there was no daylight in either room except when the door was open. EE followed more slowly, looked up at the numerous apartment windows all around that have a good view of our whole property and shuddered, "Good Heavens! If the neighbors see what's happening, the Butlers will have to pick up their boys at the police station!"

Meanwhile, we were keeping our appointment with the bishop. He'd received the letter that morning with orders to call us at 2 p.m. He'd thrown away the envelope so couldn't tell us where it was mailed. There was no signature, but we at once recognized Paul's writing even though it was on paper that must have come from the veterinary son, Mark. It referred to our wedding anniversary, warned that we must always expect the unexpected and sent us off on a sort of treasure hunt beginning at the Black Hole. It was all kind of weird but we simply had no time to really analyze events. We felt the boys must have asked someone to plant a card or gift of some kind somewhere for us to find for our anniversary.

Back home, we headed for the Black Hole. On the door we found a message in the same hand and on the same kind of paper. It sent us to the library where the message invited us to enter the chapel and step up to the pulpit. There the note informed us that we'd find what we were looking for upstairs in the living room. By this time we had ceased wondering what we might find. We were almost numb at the thought that some sort of "ghosts" had been going through all our locked doors (leaving them locked). We unlocked and opened the apartment door and knew immediately that someone had been there in our absence. The living room door in front of us was now closed. What security did we have against thieves if someone could get through most of our locked doors in half an hour in broad daylight? In a state resembling sleepwalking, we advanced and opened the door. In front of our unbelieving eyes were the four boys around a small table ignoring our intrusion. Our jaws quite literally dropped as David also dropped the keys and then tapped his forehead a few times. Carol remained motionless. Our minds were blank. David's first thought was, "Seeing is believing, BUT I DONT BELIEVE IT!" A couple of flashes revealed that off to one side was EE, camera in hand, recording our open-mouthed, blank stares. We were frozen to the spot. After a moment, Paul turned toward us and asked simply, "What did the bishop want?" As we were still unable to react, the boys finally had to get up, come to us and start hugging us to bring us back to the truly incredible real world.

Once partially recovered from the joyous shock, we took the boys back to the bishopric to get their luggage. Everyone there was expecting our return and met us with broad grins. The bishop was upstairs in his office but came down as soon as he heard we were there. As he approached, he was saying, "I must make my confession. I lied. Yes, I lied. Please grant me absolution!" How could we refuse?

Paul could stay only 5½ days, the others 12½. Just three days after that, we left on our summer tour, less well organized than ever.

We have had to omit many delightful details. If all were told, it would fill several letters of this length. These have been reported so that you might share a part of our joy if not our shock.

Here the whole country is in something akin to a state of shock since the assassination of the president of the High Council of State that is running the country while trying to get it reorganized for a more democratic future. He was just about the only man with both a clean image and enough historical stature and weight to serve as a rallying point against both the Muslim extremists and the corrupt elements of the old party apparatus. The former had already begun using terrorist tactics against all kinds of security forces before the assassination of the president in July and have continued since. In addition, there was totally indiscriminate terrorist bombing at the airport in Algiers in August. Most of this activity has been concentrated in the Algiers area and the east. It is relatively calm here in the west. Fortunately, the new president and the new prime minister seem to be collaborating in the continuing struggle against both corruption and terrorism. Still, progress is slow and success far from guaranteed.

Meanwhile, the liberalizing of the economy is making life much harder for the poor and many who were at least getting by fairly well before. It is estimated that this fall just buying school supplies (with most books supplied free) and one outfit of clothing is costing at least 1/3 of the minimum monthly wage per child. What about the families with 6 to 10 children and what of those unemployed or at least underemployed?

This country is still going through a very difficult time with the future in the balance in many respects. Please keep the whole country and the church here in your prayers.

Fraternally yours,

David and Carol Butler