

*The Muslim month of fasting
of our ecumenical ministry*

2 Bd. Abbane Ramdane
Oran, Algeria
July 17, 1980

Dear Friends:

We are now well into the first week of Ramadan, the month of day-time fasting and night-time feasting. It is usual to have newspaper articles and radio and TV programs giving more attention to religious matters during this month. This year, in the context of an elaborate mosque ceremony, the minister of religious affairs gave a televised speech on the eve of the first day of fasting and emphasized the religious nature of the fast. There has been a follow-up in the press, including an interview with the minister. He deplores, as do all the more pious and thoughtful Muslims, the excesses of night-time feasting and celebrations with the attendant waste and fatigue on the one hand and loss of the spiritual significance of the fast on the other. It is meant to be a month of intensified devotion expressing itself in prayers, study of the Quran and of the life and "Traditions" of the Prophet (meaning Muhammad, of course), self-discipline in every aspect of one's life, the purifying of intentions and thoughts, increased obedience to the divine commands. This should include a real willingness to feel the suffering of the hungry and needy and a sincere desire to develop a sense of oneness and equality within the whole community. One of the most practical results should be an active participation in social solidarity, especially in giving direct aid to the needy.

In many ways, these campaigns for restoring the spiritual meaning of the fast remind us of attempts to preach the real meaning of Christmas and to de-commercialize its celebration. The results are about the same here since the average man in the street continues to observe the fast as little more than a necessary social obligation and tries to make up for his day-time deprivation with feasting and revelry at night. For the majority, Ramadan means increasing fatigue, frayed nerves and short tempers as the month wears on.

The month of fasting is especially trying when it falls in the summer, with its long days and short nights. Moreover, since the dawn-to-dusk abstinence relates to drink as well as to food, the summer heat makes this a real ordeal. In fact, during a severe heat wave last summer, many people had to break the fast to survive. That is considered perfectly legitimate, of course, just as it is permissible to break the fast for some other reasons, such as illness. However, days of fasting that are missed during the month of Ramadan should be replaced with other days when other people are not fasting. Anyway, among the stubbornly pious refusing to break the fast, there were a number who suffered from severe dehydration.. and a few died. Fortunately, Ramadan does not always fall in the summer. The Muslim calendar used for religious purposes only, is a lunar one about eleven days shorter than our solar calendar. Hence the month makes a complete cycle through the four seasons every 32½ years.

Within our Christian community here, we continue to experience very active ecumenical cooperation and sharing. David preached at more masses than usual because he offered to help serve the English-speaking group that way during an interim when there was no priest very fluent in English. For the third straight year, our small Protestant group shared in the regional Catholic celebration of Pentecost. It was again a multi-lingual service using seven languages and again David had the major responsibility for the liturgy of the Word (including sermon) for the English-speaking group, which numbered about 200 this year. A month earlier, over the May first weekend, Oran hosted a small ecumenical meeting organized mostly by Catholics for charismatic church renewal. A few Protestants from Algiers, Constantine and here also participated. The main resource person and leader of Bible studies was a French Reformed Church evangelist active in the charismatic church renewal movement in France. He, along with the Anglican rector of Algiers and David, conducted a communion service in our chapel. The meetings ended with mass in a Catholic chapel the next day.

Indeed, here in North Africa unusual things have happened on the ecumenical front. This has not always been due to human planning and design but sometimes actually because of communication and understanding gaps at the human level. Be that as it may, we and other colleagues have been involved in services where Protestants communed at mass, where Catholics (including some priests and nuns) received the Protestant communion and even where priest and pastor concelebrated the mass. In one instance, a priest conducted an entire Protestant service with the French Reformed communion liturgy included. This was done to help out in the absence of the Protestant pastor in that particular parish.

One of the most interesting things in this regard has been our personal contact with a Swiss Reformed woman, a medical doctor, who has been accepted as a full member of an order of Catholic sisters while remaining a member of her own church. While there are a few Protestant "Sisterhoods" in Switzerland and France, it was this order of the Little Sisters of Jesus^{ne} that best suited her conception of her own calling to a simplified lifestyle centered in sharing, service and prayer.

For a couple of years, she was with a group of that order living nearly 300 miles south of here, on the steppe lands just at the northern edge of the Sahara. Seven were then in this group that lives in a tent like the nomads and maintains a small flock of sheep. Only six were in the tent at a time, since they took turns at a two-week period of rest with others of their order in the nearest town. The intention of this group is to share in the life of the nomads as fully as possible while also cultivating a life of prayer. For Sylvie, the service angle came very naturally through her training as a doctor.

We already knew some of the Little Sisters of Jesus in Oran; and when Sylvia came through on her way south, she came to see us and let us know she considered herself a part of our Protestant parish. She and others of her order suggested we go visit their tent some day. So, in the spring of 1979, we (the whole family except for Paul in college) made a "pastoral call to visit this remote parishioner and the group with which she was living. To reach the tent, we spent more than two hours following a trail that trailed off into barely visible car tracks and crossed about twenty dry river beds, often quite rocky and/or steep to enter and leave. Because our car is rather low-slung, we had lightened the load by sending Carol in the car that was guiding us. This was a car serving the sisters in town and used for occasional trips to the tent. Then, at some ten river beds, the three boys had to get out, too, to avoid scraping the tail pipe and gas tank. During our twenty-four hours in nomads' land, David conducted a night "tent" service by flashlight. Back in town, he gave brief meditations to accompany the sisters' customary morning and evening devotions. In all of this we were scarcely conscious of "Protestant" or "Catholic" labels but keenly aware of a bond of fellowship as Christian disciples and pilgrims seeking paths of faithfulness in love within a strange land.

Incidentally, Sylvia is temporarily back in Switzerland up-dating her medical training and has written us that a Baptist girl recently joined the same order there in Bern.

We have been getting our monthly magazines anywhere from two to six months late. It was just after we wrote our February letter that we found a number of articles that seemed appropriate in relation to that letter. We want to recommend the following in particular:

New World Outlook, October, 1979 (Human rights issue), pp. 25-27 on how the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd worlds see themselves and each other; p. 36 on Archbishop Romero (of El Salvador) and written before his assassination.

response, October, 1979--article by Turnipseed beginning on p. 26 (more related to our general situation than to our last letter).

The Interpreter (back in January, 1978)--article on living as good stewards in an age of scarcity, beginning on p. 4.

We could also recommend some articles in SOJOURNERS. It's a monthly put out by deeply committed evangelicals with a profound social conscience. Different people may disagree with different things in their magazine or with the same things for different reasons, but almost all are sure to find it stimulating and thought-provoking. It is a good antidote for complacency!

Usually, people in the States wonder how we handle the heat in Africa. Here on the northern coast, we don't really suffer. In the interior, even as little as twenty-five miles inland, it can be much more uncomfortable. But now it is our turn to be concerned about the great heat wave covering so much of the U.S. As people in those areas become a more important concern in our thoughts and prayers, as we think of our Muslim friends keeping the fast even in the interior and as the sincerely religious Muslims use their ordeal of fasting to remind them of the suffering of others, may we all be reminded to keep the suffering masses of humanity everywhere as a constant and vital concern for all our thoughts and prayers.

Fraternally yours,

THE BUTLERS

David, Carol and sons