



Cite Plein Ciel, C - 142
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Algeria
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Dear Friends:

A special thanks to all of you who sent Christmas cards. Not only was it great to hear from you, but with the arrival of Christmas cards, we began to feel that Christmas was indeed approaching. It's not always easy to get the "feel of Christmas" in a non-Christian country--no Christmas decorations visible outside, no carols in the stores or schools or on the radio, no Christmas programs, no TV specials. The only official recognition of Christmas here is that Christians get the day off. Everything else goes on as usual. Yet one can find Christmas in unconventional ways and places, too.

We had been wanting to go to Morocco for many months, but never seemed to be able to work it in. Finally, we decided to try to get across to the first border town before Christmas to see the country and to do some shopping.

We gathered our dossiers for our exit visas and got them on Tuesday evening before the Wednesday holiday for the Muslim new year. With our visas, we could then, on Thursday morning, get a limited amount of foreign currency to take with us. The boys' school "made the bridge," as they say in French, from the Wednesday holiday to the Thursday afternoon Friday weekend (that has replaced the Saturday afternoon-Sunday weekend since last August) by cancelling classes Thursday morning. Dave never has Thursday morning classes; so when I got back from the university Thursday noon, we took off on a leisurely drive to Tlemcen, one of western Algeria's historic towns. The weather was perfect and the countryside beautiful.

We arrived at 4 p.m. and quickly found the hostel we'd been told about by one of my students from Tlemcen. Being Thursday afternoon, it was already the weekend and too late to sign up at the downtown office. If no one else had signed up, the night guardian would probably not turn up and we would not be able to spend the night there. We just had time for a quick look at Tlemcen's Medieval ruins before dark at about 5. At 6 we were back to see if the night guardian had arrived. By 6:30 it seemed certain the guardian was not coming, so we headed downtown to find a hotel. But others had gotten there before us and everything was full. There was no room for us in the inns. We decided to head for the next town even though, because it is smaller and nearer the border, the chance of finding any room there was even less than in Tlemcen. We could imagine trying to sleep sitting in the car. And since we are already 6 people in a 5-seat car, plus our boxes of food, sleeping bags, etc., we did not particularly look forward to the prospect.

^{we} As we were driving out of Tlemcen, we passed a municipal campsite. It was obviously intended for campers and tents, but we thought there might be a chance that some permanent building could afford space and protection for our sleeping bags. Indeed, there was a bath house--unused because there were no campers--with just enough room for 3 sleeping bags. The other 3 slept in our small station wagon. We had found our stable! And when the people from the house came bearing armloads of sheepskins, we knew our manger had arrived. The people apologized for not inviting us to share their home, but there were already 15 people living in the 2 rooms of the cottage at the gate. We were cozy warm under the sheepskins.

At dawn we took off for the border--ate a late breakfast during our 2-hour border crossing. First thing in Morocco we loaded up on bananas--an item Algeria doesn't import. They somehow taste extra good when you haven't had them for awhile--and the "fun" of Christmas was beginning to take hold. We spent the afternoon shopping. Right now, handcraft goods there are far superior to the ones here in quality, variety and economy. Although most of the shopping we were doing wasn't specifically Christmas shopping, still, finding just the right thing for someone special added another traditional touch to our Christmas.

It was dark before we left town. Colored lights decorated the main street and outlined a crown atop a tower in the center of town. The lights were there for Moroccan holidays and the crown was a symbol for the Moroccan monarchy. But Christianity has baptized non-Christian symbols before and

claimed them for its own (witness the date of Christmas itself, and the Christmas tree), so we "baptized" the lights to symbolize the joy of Christmas and the Light of the World, while the crown reminded us that the 3 wise men came to worship the King of Kings. We were indeed in the Christmas spirit as we sang Christmas carols a good bit of the way home.

Christmas morning started late because of our late arrival home on Christmas eve, but we enjoyed our family Christmas. Just before dinner (we had bought a pork roast in Morocco, pork being another commodity unavailable here), one of the Cameroon students in our congregation arrived, obviously looking for Christmas. He is quite isolated at a military base 15 miles away where he is in pilot training. Lately he has had longer flights and he missed our Christmas service, as well as the one just before it. It seems in his church in the Cameroon, Christmas is a day of festivity at the church, including singing, dancing and a meal together. The church itself is elaborately decorated, choral groups of the various organizations try to outsing each other and the church women prepare a meal to remember. No wonder he was feeling particularly lonely--and perhaps homesick. We had invited another family in for carol singing Christmas night and he seemed to enjoy it especially.

Our church activities this year (including services) have met with innumerable logistical problems. Our tiny congregation is made up mostly of Swiss families working for a Swiss-Algerian company with offices in both countries, and black African students, mostly Cameroon and Congolese. The Swiss families, living nearly 10 miles out, have not been able to come much this year because the husbands travel, often spending our Algerian weekends (Thursday afternoon and Friday) in the company offices in Switzerland. They are never sure in advance whether they can come or not, so we cannot count on their cars for bringing the students. The students, most of them living 7 miles away, must then depend on public transportation (extremely unreliable) or on us. Last spring, picking up the students meant one stop for 5 or 6 students. This year it means 3 stops for 8-10 students. Our 5 seater (Renault 12 station wagon) can hardly carry more than 7 adults counting Dave--so that means 2 round trips of a half hour each, minimum. So far there has always been a hitch somewhere along the line so we are always a bit late getting started. Since we can't possibly get all the students back in time for the meals at their respective restaurants and because our apartment is too small to feed them all at one time, we try to take half of them back and have the other half for lunch and the afternoon at our place. Now that we no longer live at the site of our services, my being at home to prepare the meal just before and after the services, but still attending the services, presents another logistical complication.

And now it seems there are a few students from the Upper Volta who have arrived at the military base 15 miles from here who might be interested. With Dave and me both teaching at the university and with no telephones (they exist here, but neither we nor our constituents have been able to get any yet) the problem of communication, especially for arranging and changing plans, are complicated indeed. We can only trust that if God has plans for our little congregation, He will show us how to carry out our part.

In September-October, John and I spent 3 weeks in Lyon, France, getting him fitted with a Milwaukee brace for his scoliosis. Otherwise we are all in top condition and finding much to enjoy here.

Thanks again for all the Christmas cards--and especially the letters.

Fraternally yours,

The Butlers - Dave, Carol
Paul, John, Mark and James

