

2 Bd. Abbane Ramdane

31024 Oran, Algeria

Written on Halloween 1993

Dear Friends:

Halloween is a scary time for some people, but at least it does not last very long. The tragic reality is that many of our brothers and sisters of the human race experience harrowing Halloweens that drag on for excruciatingly long periods of time. Even a few minutes can be too long when trick or treat has become kill or be killed...or you kill my family and I'll kill yours...or live in fear now to see death strike a bit later. Does this sound a bit macabre for the beginning of a letter?

From Northern Ireland to South Africa, from the violence in our American cities to Afghanistan, from Haiti to Sri Lanka, passing through Africa, Bosnia and the Middle East, we see the bestiality of man trying to prove the axiom that most have already learned all too well: Life is fragile. The same inhumanity of man to man helps maintain and reinforce another axiom (less widely accepted): the greatness and the meanness of human character have little to do with length of life, race, class or creed. It has much to do with meaning and purpose welling up from within and finding expression in what we do and say. But, since there is nothing new under the sun, why do we share these old reflections with you now?

Recent events have reminded us that even the greatest tragedies make relatively little impact on us except as we are able to PERSONALIZE them in some way. Hundreds of thousands of nameless foreigners dying from whatever cause will not affect us as much as our neighbor being run over by a car or ourselves getting the flu. In this regard we could tell of the woman who asked some speaker, with horror in her voice, "Did you say that THIRTY people were actually STARVING to DEATH in that country?" To which he replied, "No, Mam, I said thirty THOUSAND." Upon hearing this, she heaved a very great and audible sigh of relief and muttered, "Oh, thirty thousand. I thought it was thirty." Indeed, for most of us, thirty thousand is a statistic; thirty can bear names and faces.

For us, many statistics become personalized because we have been privileged through our international ministry here to be able to see names and faces behind the names of places where tragedies are taking place. Northern Ireland, Burundi, Angola, India, Pakistan, Romania, Chad, Mozambique, Zaire, Ethiopia, Iraq, Lebanon--these are not merely geographical locations where great suffering has occurred in recent years; they are reminders of persons with whom we have shared a portion of life. Because our eyes have seen and our hearts have felt the presence of these people, we hear the news with different ears. Blessed are those who have not known many people of other lands and yet cultivate compassion, promote justice and work for peace. Thus is love redeemed from sentimentality and made the dynamic of life.

But what of our life here? The dailies remind us of the infernal cycle of killings between the fundamentalist-inspired terrorists on the one hand and the various security forces on the other. A number of leading political figures and intellectuals have also been targeted by the extremists, especially since last spring. The battle will surely continue for some time, but somehow life for most people goes on. The political process, however, is moving ever so slowly and the economy can do little better under these circumstances.

In terms of our ministry, we now have two tiny English-speaking groups located near the petro-chemical complex some 25 miles east of us in addition to our French-speaking group in Oran. We also remain much involved in ecumenical activities in the area. Carol has expanded her English library a bit and is getting more involved in book repairs and book reinforcement and protection. She also has a new group taking her advanced English course to help prepare them for the official TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) given in Algiers.

The English library is very deeply appreciated by those it serves. About half of the people who use it are studying English at the university. Carol has had to set limits on the number of these students she can accept (so many per year in the four-year program) because she could be very quickly overwhelmed. Some high school and university English teachers also use it. One university professor came by last week

to ask her to please allow 6 of his four-year students selected to do special research projects to come in and work in the library without taking any books out. A variety of other people also use the library: students from other disciplines, doctors, engineers, chemists, physicists, businessmen, etc.

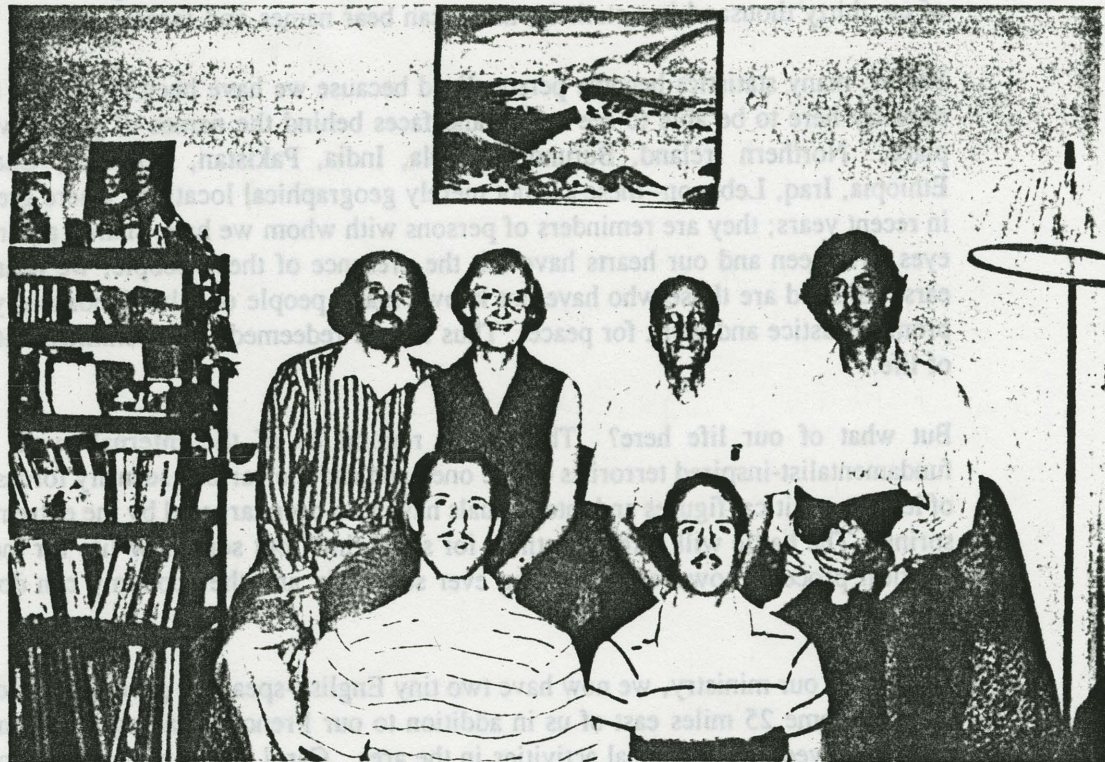
Now irrelevant
~~If anyone has books they might want to offer to the library and mail them to us, here are the types that are most useful. American, British or African literature, history or civilization, including Black American and Arab American works (and especially anthologies or special student editions for either high school or college students); special student help booklets related to the above; grammar; general linguistics; phonetics; translation; TEFL or TESL (teaching methods and testing techniques, etc.); psychology (esp. educational psychology); dictionaries (esp. for technical fields, business or other specific areas); relatively recent magazines or journals in medicine, computer science, electronics, mechanics, general science, psychology.~~

Even though it is Halloween, this must also be our letter for sending to all of you our Christmas and New Year greetings. The mail service being what it is (or isn't) these days, and with the processing that will be involved, this may not reach you till into January. If so, be grateful that it arrives when you are not so swamped with other cards, letters and activities. See the bright side of things! Indeed, our prayer for you is that the brightness of the Christmas season might brighten your whole life from within not only for the holidays but for the entire new year. And how about seeing to it that the brightness within becomes the light of love for all those around you? We would wish that for your own sake as well as for the sake of the others. At the same time we must thank you in the past/present/future tense for your love, prayers and concern that help brighten our days.

A year ago, we wrote about the incredible caper of the Butler boys--their surprise visit here in June of 1992. We should have shared with you the self-made family portrait that resulted. A bit belatedly, we do so now. Seated, left to right, are Paul, Carol, David, John (with the Marquis on his lap). In front, left to right, are Mark and Jim.

Faternally yours,

David & Carol Butler



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P.S. ~~There are a number of university students interested in pen pals (in English). We also have 2 parishioners interested. They are both from Burundi but from refugee families that went to Tanzania many years ago. Hence they can handle both French and English in addition to their native language. They are studying meteorology. Any prospective pen pals are invited to contact us.~~