

2-2006

Missionaries Among Muslims

Bernard Pelletier

René You

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-tc>

Recommended Citation

Pelletier, B., & You, R. (2006). Missionaries Among Muslims. *Spiritan Magazine*, 30 (1). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-tc/vol30/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Spiritan Collection at Duquesne Scholarship Collection. It has been accepted for inclusion in Spiritan Magazine by an authorized editor of Duquesne Scholarship Collection.

Missionaries A

Why does **Bernard Pelletier**, Spiritan missionary, remain 35 years in Mauritania, a 100% Muslim country? A country where you can't be Mauritanian unless you're a Muslim; a country where in all those years he hasn't done any baptism or any marriage?

Why does **René You**, Spiritan missionary, remain over a period of three generations in Algeria, a country 99% Muslim, among a people who are suspicious of outsiders coming in to teach them and where the only Catholics are Africans from sub-Saharan countries?

What does the face of mission look like today in these and other basically Muslim countries?

Bernard Pelletier CSSp

When I go home on holidays, many people tell me, "You'd be better off to come back to France where there's a shortage of priests. Let the Muslims practice their own religion. Don't go there to disturb them."

Even if I haven't done any baptisms or marriages in Mauritania, I believe that the church owes it to itself to be in this country which has a right to the Word of God. While not numerous, our little church is vibrant. It is made up of foreigners (mainly black Africans) who have come seeking work or are on their way to Europe.

We're one diocese with one bishop, eleven priests and thirty-five sisters. We come from twenty countries. While it has no official status, the church is nevertheless appreciated by many Mauritians.

The sisters are involved in women's and health issues — hospitals, dispensaries, care of the handicapped, and child care centres.

The handicapped have their own trade — begging. But they are not without their special dignity. We want them to earn their living, which they do by making and selling wire fencing, repairing radios, and recharging batteries.

The young people are eager to learn and ask many questions. They wanted a library for their own use. Radio and TV puts them in touch with the world and they are eager to know what is going on out there.

Good relations

The Mauritanian Muslim is very tolerant. At Christmas and Easter the imams come to wish us a happy feast day. And for each of their feasts we do the same.

When John Paul II died, a religious leader came to present his condolences on behalf of all other religious leaders. "We prayed for him in the mosques," he said, "and next Friday, the day of his funeral, we'll pray for him again." I asked what John Paul II meant for them. "He was a man of faith," he replied, "a man of peace, who brought the religions together. He wasn't afraid to speak to world leaders and to tell them the truth."

A few weeks later when I was traveling by car I greeted a police officer at a police station. He shouted out to me, "Father, there's a new Pope, called Benedict XVI, a German, a friend of John Paul II."

Coming from a Muslim, that wasn't an insignificant remark.

My mission

I've never baptized anyone in Mauritania, and yet I came here because of my faith in Jesus Christ. I didn't come here to do development work, even if I've done some. What then is my mission in this country?

One day a Muslim friend asked me, "Have you come to make me a Christian? Do you want to convert me?" — "What I

want is that you do God's will and I pray to God for that. And I ask you to pray to God for me that I do his will too."

We must remember that mission doesn't belong to us, but to Jesus Christ. We're only witness to him. No person converts another: only God converts. What does God expect of my Muslim brothers and sisters, now? What's important is that they do what God wants them to do. To a Muslim I often say, "I'm praying for you." What I ask in return is that he or she respects my faith as I respect theirs. Together we're on our way to the kingdom: enabling people of different cultures, social status, colour, and religion to get along with each other and to cooperate. That's what evangelization is."

One day I found myself among a group of young Mauritians. I shook hands with each of them. One drew back and asked, "Are you Christian or Muslim?" — "I'm Christian." — "Then I can't shake hands with you." — "God doesn't pay attention to the length of your beard or your turban, but he looks at your heart. If you're kind-hearted — Christian or Muslim — that's all that matters to God." All the young people agreed, "Hagg Allah! Hagg Allah! (That's right, by God)."

It's true I'd like my brother Muslims to get to know Jesus Christ, not only as a prophet, but as Son of God. But that's God's doing.

mong Muslims

With Christian or Muslim fundamentalists we come up against a brick wall. But don't let us think all Muslims are fundamentalists. We've met many who want peace and who suffer as much as we do from Islamic violence.

Nourished by the Eucharist

For us, living in a totally Muslim country, the heart of our mission is the Eucharist. Eucharist is not just a Christian community gathered to live the paschal mystery. It's

much more than that. What does the priest say at the offering of the bread? "Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation. Through your goodness we have this bread to offer, which earth has given and human hands have made." He doesn't say, "... which Christian hands have made", but "... which human hands have made." That means that everything good done by my Muslim brothers and sisters is what I bring to the Eucharist. That's what becomes the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

The Eucharist is not a personal devotion, but a missionary action. Nourished by the bread of life, we go out to our brothers and sisters to love them, and by that very action to bring them Jesus Christ. When I am alone in the desert, I celebrate Eucharist. But I am not alone, because I carry all that my Muslim brothers and sisters do that is beautiful.

Used with permission. *Pentecôte sur le monde*, September–October 2005.

René You CSSp

Sixty or so sub-Saharan students from a dozen countries constitute the core of our Christian community in Algeria. They get together every Friday (Sunday is a working day in this Muslim country) to reflect on questions and issues that arise from their life in a foreign environment, and to celebrate our weekly Eucharist. Because of their daily immersion among young Algerians these students are the outposts of Christian-Muslim encounter, an essential task of the Algerian church. Our church is so tiny in a country 99% Muslim that there's no possible escape from this role.

Respecting the "Other"

"You will always have the poor among you," Jesus said.

I think of Naima and Mohammed, both with serious incapacitating illness. I spend some time with them.

I think of Reda, 30 years old, who comes each morning to tell me about her nightly hallucinations. She says that her day is much better after we have talked.

There's also the old professional beggar,

who always complains of one misfortune or another in order to squeeze some money out of us.

I think of Mohammed who proclaims loudly that he's my friend so that I'll give him a coin or two to shut him up.

The core of our witness is to respect the person who is "other".

Our church is extremely limited in resources; besides which we have to be careful in dealing with people's susceptibilities. They wish to take things in hand, and are quite capable of doing so, without any lessons from foreigners. In addition, we must avoid being accused of proselytizing through our social works. We're guests and we must be discreet. That's not easy at times, face to face with the crying injustices and increasingly invasive corruption.

Sometimes prayer is the only way to express our suffering or our anger — but that too brings us close to the suffering and anger of the overlooked and forgotten around us.

Forging bonds of friendship

During the dark years of terrorism, we suffered side by side with our Muslim neighbours. They appreciated this and ongoing gestures of friendship show how deep our relationships have become.

In general today, a traditional form of Islam — more religious, more of the people, more mystical, and often very open to peaceful meeting with Christians — seems to be taking over from the invasiveness of the political Islam that sought confrontation rather than dialogue.

Today's meeting places

We need to continue setting up meeting places between Christians and Muslims — libraries, remedial courses in English and French, sewing, knitting, embroidery, macramé classes — according to local needs and available space. As many places as possible where adults, youth and children can meet each other in respect and friendship. Something similar to the way Jesus met people. ■

