

WORLD & NATION

Pope calls for forgiveness in wake of monks' slaying

By Cindy Wooden
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — Pope John Paul II asked the tiny Catholic community in Algeria to forgive those who murdered seven Trappist monks, and he appealed to Muslim extremists in the country to stop their campaign of violence.

Speaking to pilgrims marking Pentecost in St. Peter's Square, the pope said the assassinations were "the latest in a series of reprehensible episodes of violence which, for a long time, have been disrupting life in Algeria and have not spared our Catholic brothers and sisters."

The French Foreign Ministry announced May 23 that a document, signed by the Algerian Armed Islamic Group, claimed the seven French monks kidnapped almost two months earlier had been killed.

Although the monks' bodies had not been recovered as of May 28, there seemed to be little doubt that the message was authentic.

"Despite our deep pain, we thank God for the witness of love given by these religious," the pope said May 26. "Their fidelity and consistency give honor to the church and surely will be seeds of reconciliation and peace for the Algerian people with whom they were in solidarity."

Speaking of his sympathy for the monks' families, their religious order and the Catholic community in Algeria, the

pope said, "In this tragic trial they must never lack the courage for forgiveness and the strength of hope based on Christ who defeated death."

"With the words of the Book of Genesis: 'I will require a reckoning of man for man, for everyone of his brothers,' I appeal to all men of good will, and especially to those who recognize themselves as sons of Abraham, so that never again in Algeria or anywhere will similar actions be repeated; they are the most serious offenses which could be committed against God and against man," the pope said.

Pope John Paul also sent telegrams of condolence to Archbishop Henri Teissier of Algiers, in whose diocese the monastery of Notre Dame de l'Atlas was located, and to Abbot Bernardo Olivera, the Trappist general in Rome.

In both messages, the pope repeated his hopes that the monks' witness would remain a sign of Catholic-Muslim friendship and would spark an attitude of pardon among Catholics living in the North African nation.

"We are all deeply moved by what has happened to our brothers," Abbot Olivera said in a May 23 statement. "They leave us an incredible witness, that of the Gospel and the Beatitudes lived to their final consequences."

The abbot's statement also said a French Foreign Ministry official "confirmed the existence of a recording of the voices of the brothers sent to the

French ambassador in Algiers" along with a late April demand that members of the Armed Islamic Group held in French prisons be released in exchange for the monks.

The communique announcing their deaths apparently was dated May 21, shortly after French President Jacques Chirac announced he would not negotiate with the rebels.

While the Foreign Ministry initially said it had not confirmed the monks' assassination, the French government urged any of its citizens still in Algeria to leave the country.

Archbishop Teissier said in a May 25 statement that he and other French-born church personnel would not "betray the heritage of self-giving and sacrifice which our murdered brothers left us."

"We will remain, we will not abandon our Muslim friends in their moment of difficulty," the archbishop said. "It is only small groups which attack us, not the Algerian people."

At an evening prayer service in Notre

Dame Cathedral May 23, Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger of Paris extinguished the seven candles that had been burning in the church as a sign of constant prayer for the monks' safety.

The French monks were kidnapped March 27 from their monastery about 40 miles south of Algiers.

A month later, a statement claiming to be from the Armed Islamic Group said the monks' throats would be slit if the French and Algerian governments did not release members of the group they held in prison.

Throughout France May 26, parishes rang their bells in mourning for the monks before their main Pentecost Masses.

Archbishop Joseph Duval, president of the French bishops' conference, had asked parishes to ring the bells, along with offering prayers for "the assassinated monks and their families, for the Christians of Algeria and for peace. We pray for the strength to forgive, to love and to make peace."

Abbey plans memorial service

The Abbey of the Genesee in Piffard will join Trappists throughout the world in observing a memorial Mass and day Sunday, June 2, for the martyred French monks. Mass will begin at 9:50 a.m.

Abbot John Eudes Bamberger, OS-CO, the abbey's superior, had kept in touch for about a decade with one of those killed, Abbot Christian Chergé, and enjoyed dinner with him at a General Chapter meeting in Spain in 1993. The monks were living in danger in Algeria for the past four years, he said.

"The French government asked them to leave," Abbot Bamberger said, "but he and the brothers felt their place was to support the church there.

They had friendly ties with the Muslim population in general and didn't want to desert the people who supported them there.

"The monastery had been invaded before in 1993 and their life was in danger then," he added.

"But Dom Christian, a cool and courageous fellow, sort of subdued the chief of the group by his manner, and quoted the Koran to them. He probably knew the Koran better than them."

That rebel chief later died, he said. When the latest invasion took place in March, rebels found only seven of the nine monks, asleep at the time. "So those two remain," he said of the surviving monks.

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