

Of God In Men

Des hommes et des dieux
(Of Gods and Men)

Directed by Xavier Beauvois.

Review by Ragan Sutterfield

[**Editor's Note:** Although our focus here is primarily books, I found the trailer and early reviews of this movie so compelling that I could not resist Ragan's offer to review it for us. Furthermore, the monks' struggles to discern their course of faithfulness, is a striking example of the sorts of Eucharistic conversations to which our church communities are called (see the pieces in this issue on the work of Norman Wirzba and John Howard Yoder).]

Every year or so I watch *The Mission*. I watch it because it reminds me, through its story of redemption and faithfulness, what it means to be a Christian—what sorts of real challenges Christians face, what the call to non-violence looks like in a context where that decision is not easy. It is a movie that shows that a life lived in faith to Christ may well end in a manner similar to His—that the “lose your life to save it” bit isn't just some advice to just “let go,” but a true statement of a very possible outcome for those who are faithful.

The new French film, *Des hommes et des dieux* (*Of Gods and Men*) will certainly find its way into the very small collection of DVDs that I own (DVD expected out in early July). It is a meditation on the meaning of the incarnation — of the Emmanuel life of the God who is love; of the God who has chosen not only to be among us but to live through us in this strange witness we call the church.

Of Gods and Men tells the story of the monks of Tibhirine, a small community of French Cistercian brothers who lived in the hills of rural Algeria. The monks do what many brothers like them do — they study and pray, tend the gardens from which they eat, cook and clean, give medical care to the poor of



the village nearby. Their lives are intertwined with the place, not only because of the long years each of the brothers has lived in the monastery, but also because of the generations of brothers who came before them.

Early on in the film some of the brothers attend a birthday celebration, a Muslim rite of passage for the son of one of the local men who works at the monastery. The brothers seem at home praying with the local imam, a man with whom they share a deep friendship - certainly out of place, but humbly present with the people with whom they live as guests and servants.

But all is not well; violence is close at hand as radical Islamists begin a terrorist campaign that results in the death of school girls who refuse to wear hijabs and even imams that preach another Islam.

The violence comes near when a group of radicals, a part of the Algerian civil war, brutally kill a group of Croatians who were working not far from the monastery.

It was this last act of violence that forces the Cistercian brothers to face the reality of their own possible deaths at the hands of Islamists. The monks must begin to make the difficult choices of what it means to be in a place. Should they accept the protection of the military when it is offered to them? What value would there be in their death or martyrdom? How would their staying or leaving affect the community of those native people living in the village who are also terrorized by the violence all around?

The monks do not come to a quick and simple decision. Fr. Christian de Chergé, the abbot of the monastery pushes strongly at first for the monks to stay put. He tells the military that their protection is not wanted, much to the chagrin of some of the brothers. They have many discussions, they struggle together in conversation weighing the options — seeking martyrdom would certainly not fit their vocation, but neither would simply leaving the people they have come to serve.

To guide them, the monks decide to do what monks do — they pray. They pray while they work, they pray together chanting the ancient prayers of the many communities and Christians who have gone before, they pray scriptures that seem to live and speak better to a community of struggle than one of satisfaction. In their prayers they find a togetherness — with each other, with God, with the people and country they have dedicated their lives to serving.

And in their togetherness they begin to find themselves doing odd things in a world that is supposed to follow the rules of us-and-them. They confront armed extremists on Christmas Eve and question their violence with prayers to the Prince of Peace; later they will even offer medical attention to an Islamist with a bullet wound — actions the military finds uncomfortably perplexing.

Death eventually comes to the monks. They are taken captive by the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) and demands for ransom are made to the French government. The movie does not go further than the

end of what we know of their story — their deaths are a mystery that is still unsolved, with some claiming that the military may have killed the monks by mistake in a failed rescue attempt. Whoever it was, whatever the circumstances of their last hours, the monks left an enduring testimony to the life of faith as it should be lived — in humble submission to love.

Toward the end of the film we hear the voice of Fr. Christian de Chergé (as played by Lambert Wilson) reading portions of his last testimony, left at the monastery when the threats of violence began to engulf them:

I give thanks to God for this life, completely mine yet completely theirs, too, to God, who wanted it for joy against, and in spite of all odds. In this Thank You -- which says everything about my life -- I include you, my friends past and present, and those friends who will be here at the side of my mother and father, of my sisters and brothers -- thank you a thousand fold.

And to you, too, my friend of the last moment, who will not know what you are doing. Yes, for you, too, I wish this thank-you, this “A-Dieu,” whose image is in you also, that we may meet in heaven, like happy thieves, if it pleases God, our common Father. Amen!
Insha Allah!

It is my hope that we would join in such thank yous and good-byes.

Ragan Sutterfield is the author of *Farming as a Spiritual Discipline*. He lives and writes in his birthplace, Little Rock, Arkansas, where he tries to live in the abundance of God’s kingdom by riding his bike, gardening and sitting in his rocking chair.