



Antwerp, November 7, 2018

“Waiting for people”
A letter from the Bishop for Advent

Dear friends,

What are we waiting for? It is a reasonable question. Advent comes every year. Every year we dream about peace and reconciliation. Every year we read the prophets' pages full of hope and expectation. Every year we build a Nativity scene with a child in the manger. In no year did we have the feeling that these expectations were unnecessary or outdated. On the contrary, year after year reality brings new disappointments and challenges. Our most beautiful expectations still lay hidden like seeds in the ground, waiting for better times.

In the middle of Advent, on December 8, the “White Father” Charles Deckers, born and bred in Antwerp, will be beatified in Oran, Algeria, together with eighteen other martyrs. A bishop, six nuns, three other “White Fathers” and seven Trappist monks also belong to this group of Algerian martyrs. We became acquainted with these Trappist fathers through the film *“Des hommes et des dieux”*.

Charles Deckers was born on December 26, 1924 in Antwerp. He did his secondary studies at Onze-Lieve-Vrouwe College. During World War II the Jesuits encouraged their students to help those in need in the city. This made a life-long impression on Charles Deckers. After his high school studies, he decided to become a missionary in Africa and so arrived in Algeria, then a French colony. He studied the Islam and learned Arabic and Berber languages. In Tizi Ouzou, where he lived and worked the longest, he mainly devoted his attention to the youth. He founded a technical school where young people could learn a trade.

During the Algerian War (1954-1962) he did everything he could to prevent young people from joining extremist or violent groups. Because the civil authorities didn't like his impact on Algerian young people, he had to leave the country in 1977.

He remained abroad for ten years: five years in Brussels and five years in Yemen. In Brussels he worked with others to establish “El Kalima”, a center for meeting and dialogue between Christians and Muslims. Finally in 1987 he could return to Algeria. He was affiliated as priest with the Basilica of Our Lady of Africa in the capital, Algiers. Once again he promoted meeting and dialogue, especially with young people. Once again he founded a vocational school.

After 1990 the political tension in Algeria was steadily increasing. Islamic fundamentalist groups were responsible for deadly attacks against all who worked for peace and reconciliation in the country. Violence also increased against Christians. Even with these threats, most of the priests and religious members did not leave the country; Charles Deckers also stayed out of solidarity with the beleaguered Christians and with his threatened Islamic friends. It was a conscious choice, supported by deep spirituality. On December 26, 1994 he celebrated his 70th birthday in Algiers. The next day he left for Tizi Ouzou for a visit to his fellow monks. Less than 30 minutes after his arrival, an armed commando stormed into the building and murdered the four “White Fathers” including Charles Deckers.

Expecting is not to give in to disappointment or bitterness. It is to keep hoping on what seems to be impossible. Actually, the most beautiful expectations of mankind still lay hidden like seeds in the ground, waiting for better times. When will that hidden seed germinate, grow and bloom? This is the unanswered question. This year the martyrs of Algeria give Advent a real face. Their hope and expectation are not gone. They are in the ground - also with us - waiting for better times. The question of Advent is not when will God come, but, when will people receive Him. It is more annoying waiting for people than for God.

A handwritten signature in black ink, starting with a cross symbol followed by the name "Johann Bonny". The script is cursive and fluid.

Bishop of Antwerp