

Of Gods and Men

This weekly bulletin insert complements the curriculum published by the Department of Christian Education of the Orthodox Church in America. This and many other Christian Education resources are available at <http://dce.oca.org>.



Monks have faced persecution many times in the history of the Church. We know countless stories of monastic courage, unshakable faith and martyrdom from earlier centuries.

The 2010 movie "Of Gods and Men" is a story about modern monastics. They are eight French-born Cistercian Trappist monks, living and serving in an old abbey in Algeria. The monks are good neighbors to the surrounding Muslim populace, working side by side with them, attending their family celebrations, and offering them spiritual and emotional support. The abbot, Brother Christian, studies the Quran in an effort to understand their faith. Another monk, an older man named Brother Luc, is a doctor and sees as many as 150 patients a day. He treats each one with love and respect even though he is exhausted, has limited supplies of medications, and worries that he cannot keep up with the latest advances in medicine.

The movie shows the monks' daily life, and much of it will be familiar to Orthodox viewers, especially if they have visited monasteries. The men chant psalms, come together for prayer at prescribed times, and eat meals in silence while one member reads from spiritual writings. They also keep bees and sell homemade honey at the local market.

But the serene life of the monastery is soon to be violently interrupted. The movie is set in the 1990's, when Algeria was being torn apart by civil war between Islamist revolutionaries and the government's forces. Atrocities have become commonplace, and the simple villagers living near the monastery are terrified. Foreigners are suspect; a group of Croatian day workers have had their throats slit by the revolutionary terrorists for no apparent reason.

Because the monks are natives of the country that colonized and, in the view of the terrorists, plundered Algeria, they are potential targets. The central theme of the movie becomes their agonizing decision about whether to leave for a safer place, or stay to continue their ministry and face possible death.

Their position becomes increasingly precarious and uncomfortable. When Brother Luc treats an injured revolutionary, the government army commander considers it an act of treason. His hostility is matched by that of the local governor, who keeps urging the monks to leave so that he will not have their blood on his hands. He is bewildered and frustrated when they continue to refuse.

The movie has an element of suspense: will the revolutionaries invade the monastery? But the climax is the monastic brothers' decision that they will follow the path of Christ's martyrdom and will stay where God has put them. Brother Christian writes to a friend that he looks forward, after death, to seeing God's "children of Islam" as God Himself sees them.

"Of Gods and Men" is based on a true event. A group of monks were abducted and beheaded by Algerian terrorists in 1996. The movie's end shows them as they must have been, fearful but steadfast, walking laboriously up a hill followed by their captors and disappearing into the mist.