

A Life Poured Out

Pierre Claverie of Algeria

Jean-Jacques Pérennès

Translated by Phyllis Jestice
and Matthew Sherry

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Chapter One

From Happy Childhood to Youth as a Pied-Noir

I have been witness to a love of more than forty years that unites two beings, my parents, so different and yet so close, depending on each other, growing together, so united and so welcoming.¹

—*Pierre Claverie*

Pierre Claverie was born in Algiers on May 8, 1938, to a family of *pieds-noirs*, French people who had lived in Algeria for several generations. Algeria was his country.

He was full of the joy of life. Did he owe that to his Mediterranean origins? A little bit, without doubt. But much more came from the fact that he was a happy child, loved by exceptional parents. It was to them first of all that he paid homage at his ordination as bishop in the cathedral of Algiers on October 2, 1981: “We grew up trusting in that love that watches attentively and unfailingly over the happiness of others; we grew up with a wonderful freedom that continuously opened the doors of life in front of us, inviting us patiently and persistently to enter, and accompanying us with an affectionate and demanding presence. Yes, love exists; it is possible and I have had the good fortune of knowing it.”² From this happy childhood Pierre Claverie preserved an outstanding emotional balance that was invaluable to him in his later life.

A Rather Uncommon Family Story

Pierre was the first child of a family that his parents had hoped would be large. Because of the uncertainties of the war, though, he had only one sister, Anne-Marie, who was born in 1944. These four constituted what the parents called the “family cell,” a nucleus in which communication and confidence reigned to an unusual extent: “We are the four fingers of the hand,” Mr. Claverie liked to say; “if one fails, the others fall.” The maintaining of this family unity seems to have been the most important goal of the elder Claveries, both of whom had, in their own ways, painful family histories.

Étienne Claverie was born in Algiers on October 12, 1906. His mother, a member of a large family in Belcourt, a working-class neighborhood of Algiers, was only fourteen years old when she gave birth to this child. The young man was only seventeen. The child of a prominent Algiers family who disapproved of this relationship, he did not marry her and did not acknowledge the child, who remained for life, therefore, an illegitimate child, a bastard. The young mother had to deal with this situation completely by herself and dragged her son about with her, first to Egypt and then to Spain, where she met a Mr. Claverie, who worked for the Saint-Gobain company. He recognized the child as his, so Étienne henceforth had a family name, which he passed on to his own children. But this Mr. Claverie in turn disappeared, and the young mother had to return to Algiers, where she placed her child in the care of his grandmother and aunts to be raised. Later she moved to Maisons-Alfort near Paris, and this time married a man with whom she lived for the rest of her life. But the wound was there. For his entire life Étienne Claverie would attempt to learn more about his childhood, but he never succeeded to any great extent and seldom spoke about it. In a way, he sublimated his unhappiness by doing everything in his power to make his own family happy. Out of the misfortune that was his as a child, Étienne Claverie developed a strong personal morality, marked by a sense of honor and exceptional integrity. His children grew up in this environment. "But," he liked to say to them, "my life began when I met your mother."

Louise Maillard came from a completely different environment: a prosperous family of shipowners, who lived in a beautiful building on the seafront in Algiers. A well-to-do environment, but not any happier: a depressed mother who died young, a father deeply scarred by the Great War, whose second marriage was to a much younger woman. He had a son, Jean, whom his daughter Louise, then fourteen, helped to raise. It was an environment where fine clothes and social events mattered a great deal. It was at the Shell Oil Company Club that Étienne Claverie first noticed this very popular young woman: lively and outgoing, she had "a personality full of sunshine," as her daughter Anne-Marie puts it. But there was no question of Étienne Claverie proclaiming his love. With his keen sense of honor, he did not want to let others imagine that he, the lowborn child, was above all after her money. So he had to be content with watching her, but as often as possible. Suddenly came a stroke of luck, as he humorously told the story later. The stock market collapsed — this was in the 1930s; the family business went bankrupt, and he ran immediately to ask for the hand of Miss Maillard. The wedding took place on April 20, 1936, in the parish church of St. Vincent de Paul in Algiers where their first child, Pierre, would himself be baptized on November 6, 1938.

The Family Cell, the First Apprenticeship of Life

By this time, Étienne Claverie had found a job at Shell Oil on the boulevard Saint-Saëns in Algiers, where he spent his entire professional career. The young couple went to live in Bab el Oued, at number 4 rue Koechlin, because they did not want to leave behind the elderly parents and uncles who lived in the same building. They never moved from this apartment, even at the height of the Algerian War when Mr. Claverie's daily walk to his office was not without dangers. Despite past misfortunes, or perhaps because of them, the young couple did everything they could to create a happy family. Anne-Marie recalls the atmosphere of this childhood:

The view from the three balconies of our apartment at Bab el Oued was magnificent. On one side was Notre Dame d'Afrique and the neighborhood of St. Eugene, and, on the other, the sea and the Padovani Baths. We spent a lot of time on those balconies, which served as our lookout post . . . Pierre spent hours teaching me to whistle, an essential part of my education in his eyes . . . We also developed all sorts of rituals, like the one that made it fun to clear the table after meals. We passed one another while carrying glasses and napkins, eyes closed and singing a magical song whose only words, repeated *ad nauseam*, were "Uncle Leo, Uncle Leo" . . . We had marvelous parents who loved us totally unselfishly.³

Simply, as we see, the elder Claveries had achieved their goal of giving birth and life to a happy family. Pierre Claverie drew from it a love of life and an emotional balance capable of standing up to anything. The neat regularity of his handwriting bears witness to his temperament. Surprisingly, but also rather typical of his character, he never spoke of his parents' painful past. He was not the sort of man who confided in others. "Trait for trait, I resemble my 'brute' of a father," he wrote to his parents in March of 1959; "we both hide our feelings . . . but if I don't talk more about them, it's not because I don't have any, you can be sure of that."

This family cell, as Mr. Claverie called it, provided the setting and fertile environment in which Pierre's personality grew.⁴ It was a group of four: Papie, Mamie, Pierre, and Nane, as they called each other: four people among whom communication and trust developed and blossomed to a rare degree. Later an American son-in-law, Eric, and two little girls, Ingrid and Celine, would join the four, but the fundamental pattern of relationships was already in place. Papie was nearly blind because of a tragic incident in his youth; his remaining

eye was just good enough that he could read with the aid of a magnifying glass. But he listened a great deal: to the radio constantly, especially as he grew old, but also to people, and first of all to his family. Introverted without being withdrawn, he had the reputation of being a wise man. His good friends liked to call him “le vieux bonze,” the old Buddhist monk. Athletic in his youth, every morning he performed a kind of yoga invented by himself, part of a very disciplined life. As for Mamie, she liked to laugh and was extroverted, thus serving very well as a complement to her husband, who said teasingly to her at times, “Mamie, you are thinking like a child.” In fact, they were a very united couple, in agreement on essentials. As they grew older, their mutual love was moving to see. Personality traits from the two found their way into their son: his mother’s joy of life and his father’s determination. “Pierre took the best of both; it is rare to do so to such an extent,” his sister, Anne-Marie, says.

Pierre Claverie was one year old when World War II broke out. Later came the Algerian war of independence from France. In short, during his childhood, the outside world was often in turmoil, but his parents spoke little of these matters at home, expending all their energy to protect their children and provide them with a happy and trusting environment in which to grow. They had joy, a great deal of joy, at home. They laughed; they told each other stories; uncontrollable laughter was common. They went to the beach and, in the summer, spent their vacations together in France. Pierre experienced this life until he reached the age of nineteen and did not seem to suffer from what was, after all, a fairly strict parental control. Though he was concerned about education, Étienne Claverie also knew how to give some free space to his children. But he had something to pass on and he did so, leaving a profound mark on his son’s personality. From the day that Pierre left for the University of Grenoble in November 1957 and then for the Dominican novitiate at Lille in December 1958, Papie did everything he could to maintain close family ties through a remarkable weekly correspondence in which, in four typewritten pages, he told about the events of the week, day by day, serious or insignificant, commenting on this or that, blending humor with advice and questions. And Pierre, a young exile from his Algerian homeland, responded: ten letters during his first month in Grenoble! Later there was a letter per week, usually written on Sunday, using carbon paper so the letters could be circulated to the other two poles of this family, his parents and his sister, who also wrote when, beginning in 1961, she left Algeria to study in France. Later, in the parents’ old age, there were also weekly telephone calls — at set days and hours, 10:00 a.m. on Sunday for Pierre — but all that was essential was expressed in the correspondence.

Papie had a remarkable writing style, the vivacity of the natural storyteller and a gift for striking phrases. His letters usually started with an affectionate and slightly comical greeting, such as “my doves,” “my ducks,” “my lady camels,” or “my pigeons and my penguin.”⁵ Pierre usually responded to these salutations with “hello, everyone,” or “hello, family,” but sometimes with his father’s humorous tone: “my dear little old folks” or “my little angels.” Mamie wrote her own message (“to my little Pierrot”), and one can feel that she was very much a part of what her husband wrote: Mamie thinks this, wonders about that. The content of the letters was anything but trite. There is talk of the daily life of a young son away from home (colds, socks to be replaced, the packages that his parents are sending him), but also essential matters. For nearly forty years in these letters, Pierre Claverie shared with his family his most personal investigations into questions concerning God, prayer, the religious life, and peace, and also his reaction to movies, books, and events. His parents thus continued to play an intimate part in his life, and their own attitudes changed profoundly on several points, including faith, the relationship with Algeria, the view of Islam. And at a turn of even the most serious discussion came the sense of humor, the witty phrase that gave everything a light touch. Something rather rare for a young man or, later, for someone with big responsibilities, Pierre wrote with the same regularity, two pages a week, whatever his cares, his occupations, or his travels. This correspondence was preserved in its entirety and is one of the sources of this book, along with Pierre Claverie’s other writings, my own memories, and accounts received from other witnesses. The correspondence would be well worth at least a partial publication because it covers a slice of nearly forty years in the life both of the world and of the church.⁶ It stretches from the beginning of November 1957, when Pierre left Algiers for Grenoble, to June 19, 1996, a month and a half before his assassination. Papie died on April 3 of that same year, four months before his son. Mamie had already passed away on February 11, 1992. Étienne Claverie was well aware of the importance of the letters and preserved them carefully, putting them all together at the end of each year in simple containers constructed out of cereal or cracker boxes and tied up with string so none would be lost. He explained all of this in the letter of January 17, 1965, very much in his usual style:

One day you will find at the bottom of a chest in a cellar some packets, more or less well bound and painstakingly organized. Take care not to throw them away before you have looked into them. You will be amazed by what these pages reveal. First of all history, which you will

be surprised to rediscover with such vividness, but also a large quantity of other things, of feelings, of unchanging trust between your parents and yourselves, as well as in your destinies, that will take your breath away, unless you are fools, which, truly, I recognize that you are not.

Here we have Étienne Claverie's usual tone: humor is never far from the deepest feelings. Papie's letters were not all preserved, which is regrettable because of their style and their content, so revealing about the family environment and the events its members experienced. Clearly, for Pierre Claverie's parents, this correspondence was a means to maintain and enhance the ties of the family cell, in order to give to each member the best chance to face successfully the challenges of life. From his retreat in Nice, five years after being forced into exile from Algeria, Étienne Claverie made the following comments to his children: "Definitely we have been blessed and are capable of holding up against any storm. You, above all, for whom the road ahead is still very long. We still can't believe that we have prepared you so well for life. It would be impossible to give a clear recipe to so many families that are disunited" (letter of January 8, 1967).

Blessed, indeed, but these parents had paid the price. Thus, Étienne Claverie, who had become head of public relations for Shell Oil in Algiers, turned down an attractive offer to head the Dakar branch of this company so that he could preserve this family life in which he believed so strongly. Yes, this man was not at all an ordinary one. His exceptional personality and the love which bound him to his wife did a great deal to strengthen Pierre, to give him a solid foundation in order to face, in his turn, the challenges of life. He would indeed need it.

The Context of an Algerian Childhood: The Colonial Bubble

Pierre Claverie spent his childhood and youth almost entirely in Algiers, apart from summer vacations in France; this influenced his first vision of Algeria, Arabs, and Islam. As a reminder, France gained a foothold in Algeria in 1830 through a military invasion, arriving after three centuries of Turkish administration, during which an Algerian national identity was never really affirmed. The path seemed clear: in the wake of Marshal Bugeaud's soldiers came the first colonists, who took several decades to take root in this country, draining marshes, building dams, looking for crops that could grow in this variable and

semiarid climate: wheat, grape vines, olive trees, and citrus plants were cultivated with some success, but not without difficulty. Large agricultural estates were created, model farms, recognizable by the grand avenue of palm trees leading to the master's home. The passing attempts at Algerian resistance were repressed. The population of European descent grew significantly, and colonial villages were established in the great plains. By 1930, when the hundredth anniversary of the colonization of Algeria was celebrated with great pomp, an entire pieds-noir population had become established, coming from France but also from Spain, Italy, and Malta. The mixture of cultures was most pronounced in Oran and its surrounding area. Modern cities appeared next to traditional Algerian medinas: Oran, Algiers, Philippeville, Bône, and, in the interior, Constantine, Mascara, and Sidi-bel-Abbès. With their beautiful buildings, their avenues and their gardens, they looked like European cities, with the sun as a bonus. From it came the designation "Algiers the White" for the capital, a pleasant sight for anyone arriving by ship. In 1962, when Algeria won its independence, this population of European descent amounted to nearly a million people, to which should be added 120,000 Jews, native to Algeria, but integrated into the French state ever since the Crémieux decree of 1870. There were nearly eight million Algerian Muslims. Even as colonists dwelling in the countryside lived side by side with the "Arabs" on a daily basis, learned their language and worked with them, city dwellers could go for years closed off in their own world without meeting any, except as a mere backdrop to their daily lives. This is the life Pierre Claverie lived, as he himself admitted. A sort of juxtaposition.

Algiers at that time had very distinct neighborhoods. The "Arabs" lived especially in the Casbah and outlying districts. The pieds-noir population occupied the main part of the modern city, and each neighborhood had its own social characteristics. The residential neighborhoods were on the heights (El Biar, Hydra), while the business districts were along the seafront and near the port. Bab el Oued, where the Claverie family lived, was a rather mixed neighborhood: members of the middle class but also artisans, shopkeepers, fishermen, many people from Mahon, migrating Spaniards from the Balearic Islands, and Maltese. It was a neighborhood full of life, sometimes very colorful, where the local idiom ("pataouète") had juicy phrases and accents. There was a style, a way of behaving, of telling stories, of savoring life, made famous by the epic tales of Cagayous, the Algerian urchin, which were retold among pieds-noirs along with *kémia* and a glass of anisette.⁷ Belcourt, home of Étienne Claverie's mother, was even more working-class. It is where Albert Camus spent his impoverished childhood, as told in his posthumous work *The*



Pierre, at age three, with his parents.



First Communion
at Bab el Oued.



Pierre Claverie (left) with the scouts
of Saint-Do in Algiers.

First Man.⁸ His writings, like those of Jules Roy, help one better understand this Mediterranean mind-set, made up of love of life and exuberance, but also of an acute perception that these pleasures are ephemeral. Claverie later referred to this mentality while speaking of death and the passion for life characteristic of Mediterranean societies.

This was the setting in which Pierre Claverie grew up, a setting and a heritage that affected him profoundly. He truly felt himself to be *pieds-noir* and never repudiated this heritage, even later when he lived in Algerian Algeria. Although he established a certain distance from the political positions of many *pieds-noirs*, he remained emotionally faithful to them and showed it. He had their love of life and found it hard to bear the distance from sun and sea while he was studying in France, to the point that his master of studies gave him special permission to go out on the grounds of the priory from time to time, weather permitting, to read and work in shorts.

Like many *pieds-noirs*, he spent almost his entire youth in Algiers without really encountering “Arabs,” as they were called at the time, except for the cleaning woman who came to the house:

I spent my childhood in Algiers in a working-class neighborhood of that cosmopolitan Mediterranean city. Unlike other Europeans born in the countryside or small towns, I never had Arab friends, not in my neighborhood school, where there weren't any, nor at the high school, where there weren't many, and where the Algerian War was beginning to create an explosive climate. We were not racists, only indifferent, ignoring the majority of the people of the country. They made up part of the landscape for our excursions, the backdrop for our encounters and our lives. They were never partners.⁹

Claverie's understanding of the world of his youth evolved over the years. One can even say that he never stopped thinking about his own experience, reinterpreting it in light of the convictions he acquired over time. Thus, starting in 1991, the expression “colonial bubble” appeared in his writings. It returned frequently thereafter to characterize this enclosed world from which he eventually sought to free himself: “The fact is that I passed obliviously by the Muslims although they constituted nine-tenths of my human environment. I was able to live for twenty years in what I now call a ‘colonial bubble’ without even seeing the others.”¹⁰ More serious in his eyes, Christianity had done little to break down this ignorance about the other: “I must have heard numerous sermons about loving my neighbor, because I was also a Christian

and a Boy Scout, without ever realizing that the Arabs were also my neighbors. I did not leave this bubble, as others were able to do, to go to discover this different world beside which I lived permanently without knowing it. It took a war to make that bubble burst.”¹¹

Pierre Claverie was not immersed in a truly racist climate, because his family environment protected him from that. Besides, many *pieds-noirs* were far from being exploitative colonists on a large scale, as has sometimes been suggested. It was more a matter of indifference on a day-to-day basis, the absence of awareness, even in people with the best intentions, that an Other was there. The secular ideology of the French Republic, moreover, helped accentuate the distance from the world of the Muslims. Relations were cordial, the French Algerians like to say. This is without a doubt, and it is this which made it more difficult to recognize the ambiguities, as shown by René Lenoir, another *pied-noir* who, like Pierre Claverie, reflected and followed a path of discovery on this point:¹²

It took me a long time to see the racism around me. My father didn't talk about Arabs; he lived in his own world of the TSF and music. My mother, from the lower class, was ennobled by her goodness; she had a horror of vulgarity, and I never heard her insult anyone. The Arabs respected and liked her, especially the poor . . . But then I noticed that adults, neighbors or friends, spoke of the Arabs with fear or disdain. These “Arabs in general,” reputed to be liars or fellows quick with their knives, were the people in the depths of the country whom one did not know. Fortunately, there were also “Arabs in particular,” the vendor of fresh cheese with whom one exchanged pleasantries on the doorstep, the neighbor woman to whom one entrusted the baby, the gardener who entered our home like it was his own. These were exceptions, but every *pied-noir* family had its exceptions.¹³

This passage helps one understand the ambiguity of so many situations and the suffering of the French who left Algeria and believe that their relationship with the Arabs has been misrepresented. But, there was also racism plain and simple, as the same author shows:

My perception of racism became more acute when I mingled with city folk in cafes, trams, and stadiums. The Arab bus conductor was always automatically addressed familiarly as “tu” . . . The common people among the *pieds-noirs* liked to use contemptuous terms like “*raton*,” little rat; “*bougnoule*,” wog; “*bicot*,” Arab. With a majority in the cities,

they vaguely felt the rising competition from the common people among the Arabs in workshops, stores, offices . . .¹⁴

Eventually the question of the Other became the fundamental question for Pierre Claverie, to the point that one can ask whether he might not have had an unconscious longing to make up for something that he missed in his youth. This intelligent and friendly man could not fail to regret that he became aware so late of the ambiguities of the colonial world of his childhood. He would have to leave that environment to break decisively from his previous understanding of it. For the majority of people of that time, the simple fact was that Algeria was French and its regions were French provinces. And that's all there was to it.

The Scouts of the Saint-Do: Friends for Life

Education was first of all a family matter and taken seriously, in an atmosphere of trust and humor. The elder Claveries knew pretty well what they wanted for their children: conscious of the limits of what the street can teach in a working-class district like Bab el Oued, they also had no illusions about the moral climate of a certain kind of Algerian bourgeoisie. Pierre began by going to the public Rochambeau elementary school in the neighborhood, then attended the lycée Bugeaud, since renamed the lycée Emir Abd el-Kader. Very few Algerian children attended the high school, the most well known in Algiers, "only two or three per class," as the Algerian author Jamal Amrani, one of Pierre Claverie's classmates from the sixth grade on, remembers. "He was always ranked among the best students," Amrani recalls, "and succeeded without giving the impression of working." The two were punished together more than once for provoking uncontrollable laughter, something to which the mischievous Pierre was accustomed. But in general his schooling passed without notable incident, and in 1956 he received his baccalaureate in category C (mathematics) with distinction.

There was also the catechism. His parents were Christians "as one is around the Mediterranean," said Pierre Claverie. Even though they rarely attended church in those days, they still registered their son for his catechism because that was part of a normal education. Pierre distinguished himself on the very first day, as his father laughingly reported, by crossing himself backward! He prepared there for his first communion and confirmation under the care of Abbé Streicher, an Alsatian who was a fervent partisan of French Algeria, like nearly everyone in the parish of St. Vincent de Paul in those days. This priest

was present on the day of Pierre's own ordination at Le Saulchoir in July 1965. Pierre Claverie does not seem to have retained significant memories of this childhood religious education. It was quite otherwise with the Boy Scouts, where, thanks to the advice of a colleague at Shell, his father sent him in 1948 at the age of ten.

For many at that time in Algiers, the scouts had a nickname, "the Saint-Do." They labeled thus a group created by the Dominicans of Algiers in the early 1930s and developed through the combined efforts of Fr. Lefèvre and Max Dervaux. Consisting of three Boy Scout troops, three packs of Cub Scouts, a group of advanced scouts, and a company of Girl Scouts, the Saint-Do met at the little Dominican priory on the rue Edith Cavell, between the rue Michelet and the parc de Galland, in a completely European neighborhood of the city. Pierre belonged to "the Saint-Jacques," one of the three troops of the Saint-Do, and worked his way up through every rank from last man in his patrol to head of his troop, to advanced scout. He even became "un écuyer [squire] de France," a rare distinction limited to those who earned all their badges. "Pierre already wasn't like the others: he had a clear sense of his life," remembers Jean-François Cota, his friend in childhood and adolescence. His cheerful and lively temperament earned him the "vigilant squirrel" as his totem, or special name. He lived every aspect of the scouting experience: group life and camps with their games in the open air and their evenings around the campfire. Pierre went to a number of summer camps, from one in Alsace in 1949 to a camp for advanced scouts in the Ardennes in July 1957, which ended with a retreat at the monastery of Orval where the scouts, as he later confessed, made inroads in the monks' beer supplies. "I remember his returns home from summer camps," his sister, Anne-Marie, writes, "camps from which Pierre came back thin as a rake, as our mother said, black from the sun and accumulated filth, and overflowing with amazing stories which made me dream until my turn came to experience similar things."¹⁵ Guy Maigrot, a fellow scout through all those years, remembers:

Although only a new scout at the time, Pierre was a driving force in his patrol, with an innate cheerfulness and a sense of humor that was caustic but never malicious and which made us crack up . . . From that time on, what never ceased to attract me about him was that gaze from "elsewhere," both profound and vigilant, doubtless revealing his true questions, his lively intelligence always on the lookout . . . He caught on quickly and got to the heart of matters in a way astonishing for a boy of eleven or so.¹⁶

Is this reinterpretation after the fact, an idealization? Probably not, because this memory is consistent with the personality that we will come to know later. François Chavanes, who arrived as a young religious at the Dominican priory in Algiers in 1954, remembers a boy of sixteen, who was very lively and determined, drawing together his patrol around him “with both authority and gentleness.” Pierre also excelled as an actor. In 1955 he played the role of Diafoirus in Molière’s *Imaginary Invalid*, performed, as was every annual gala, at the salle Bordes in the center of Algiers. Besides camaraderie and a kind of apprenticeship in responsibility, Pierre received from the Saint-Do the influence of someone who indirectly made a significant mark on his life, Fr. Lefèvre.

Louis Lefèvre had just arrived from Iraq when the Saint-Do was entrusted to him by Fr. Le Tilly, prior of the Dominican priory of Algiers, founded in 1932 at the request of Archbishop Leynaud. A young religious of thirty-five, Fr. Lefèvre had spent five years in Mosul, where he, along with other French religious, took care of the youths enrolled in the séminaire St-Jean, where Chaldean and Syriac clerics were trained. There, among other things, he created a brass band of which he was very proud. The son of a well-to-do family of Neuilly, he liked to associate with the upper crust of Algiers. But he also had zeal to spare and a real influence over young people, to whom he gave a “catechism of perseverance” that helped many adolescents deepen their faith. His persona would be emblematic of the Saint-Do, up until its dissolution in 1963 and even afterward, thanks to a very active network of “old boys of the group Saint-Dominic d’Alger,” to which he gave inspiration and life. For all these youths, he was and often remained “Father,” the one who knew all of them by their first names and helped them along their paths in life. Evenings around the campfire he brought the scouts together around him, “and Father taught me about God,” as Jacques Campredon, a former president of the old boys of the Saint-Do, puts it so well. He had a marked impact on the boys, teaching and confirming them in their faith, to the point that, still today, these former scouts, organized as an association, continue to attend reunions in large numbers and stay in contact with one another through a regular bulletin, *Feux*, created in 1936 and still numbering 650 subscribers.¹⁷

Fr. Lefèvre left his mark on Pierre Claverie, who said in 1988 at the celebration of the tenth anniversary of his death:

Ten years already, and his blue-eyed gaze rarely leaves me, sometimes mocking with the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, sometimes somber

and profound in attentiveness or reflection . . . There is such a weight of presence in this gaze that I am still amazed at Father's absence. All the other things about him seem only the unchanging props of this presence: Basque beret on his head, a belt tightly holding his Dominican habit or his light smock, his square goatee, his head high, a walking stick in his hand, his laced boots on his feet, a smile on his lips. More than his words, I believe that it was this presence that made such a strong impression on me. Discreet and attentive, distant and yet close, unimposing but also intense.¹⁸

It was thanks to him that Pierre was able to make his childhood faith more profound, but this was more, as he admitted himself, through a sort of presence and example than by formal teaching, which does not seem to have made a great impression:

I must not have been spiritual or devout enough to follow his religious instruction with sufficient attention to talk about it today. I don't remember a thing . . . except the profound respect that formed around him as he prayed or led prayers. Next to him, we were able to discover that one can be proud and joyful to be Christians without being timid or overly anxious about it.¹⁹

These few modest words allow us to imagine what Pierre received from him. Was it Fr. Lefèvre who led him to the Dominican order? Only indirectly, as he indicated to his parents when he informed them of his decision to enter the novitiate:

He never encouraged me for a single instant to join the order, no more than he held me back from doing so. It would be too simpleminded, I believe, to think that Father is a recruiter who stumbled upon a fool ripe for plucking, and it would be very uncharitable to credit to him something that comes only from me — and a little from the family education that you have given me . . . That he guided me, unconsciously on his part, he would tell you himself if you spoke about it one day, as, if you want to put it this way, one follows the guide on an excursion that one has chosen to take . . . (letter of October 20, 1958)

Even while acknowledging a debt, Pierre Claverie proclaimed his free choice in this matter. Gradually, in the course of his personal maturation, he distanced himself from some of Fr. Lefèvre's positions, while maintaining his affection for him. Fr. Lefèvre was in fact a rather committed partisan of

French Algeria, like the majority of the Dominicans in Algiers in those days, of whom he was at one time the prior. His partisanship was not so much the product of an explicit ideology — as was the case for others — as of a lack of detachment from the pieds-noir milieu in which he was immersed. Moreover, he seems to have been influenced by reading a fundamentalist journal, *La Pensée catholique*, published by his own brother, Abbé Luc Lefèvre. In 1971, Pierre Claverie wrote to him to express his disappointment with his mental blocks concerning the future of Algeria. Here is what he said about it to his parents, who were friends of Fr. Lefèvre:

When will he free himself from this negative and reactionary attitude? Ten years afterward, is it not possible to begin to look a little more toward the present and the future? I'm not saying that the past is "unimportant" or that it is necessary to deny the pain, still too acute, of the pieds-noirs. I'm only saying, as you well know, that there is no point in maintaining it by all sorts of outward signs and inappropriate articles. (letter of October 25, 1971)

Fr. Lefèvre, like many pieds-noirs, left Algeria shortly after it gained its independence. Pierre Claverie, however, decided one day to return there, which earned him a rather disillusioned note from his former chaplain. At one time Fr. Lefèvre had dreamed that Pierre might succeed him as chaplain of the Saint-Do. Their paths were going to diverge significantly, but Pierre Claverie always remained grateful to him. From 1983 on, five years after Fr. Lefèvre's death, Pierre did, in a way, as we will see, become his successor. It was for the Saint-Do that he gave a magnificent sermon on the cross of Christ and the gift of his own life at Prouilhe on June 23, 1996, a couple of weeks before his death.²⁰ With the personal warmth and the clarity of expression of which he was capable, he shared with these old boys of Algeria — his old scouting friends — his thoughts and questions about the new Algeria, Islam, and the ties to be renewed between the two shores of the Mediterranean. Despite their still open wounds, several members of the Saint-Do concretely demonstrated their solidarity with Pierre's choice and today's Algeria by organizing shipments of books to the libraries of the diocese of Oran and to the organization Caritas-Algeria, of which Denis Gonzalez, another old member of the Saint-Do, was in charge. One sees here another of Pierre Claverie's character traits: a personal aversion to ideological confrontation, to the point of sometimes appearing ambiguous. He had more faith in human relations than in overly abstract debates. Did points of view seem irreconcilable? He would break into laughter and talk about something else. But the bonds, the human relations, were not severed.

A Young Man Facing the Great Choices of Life

Summer 1956: Pierre Claverie had the scientific baccalaureate in hand. He thought about his future and envisaged the possibility of entering a seminary. He first confided his thoughts to Jean-François Cota one evening at the scout camp beside the campfire. His father, to whom he then spoke about it, advised him to pursue his university education before making a decision. Concern to see his son mature? Fear that the idea was just a youthful caprice? Pierre accepted the advice and agreed with his parents that he would reopen the matter after he had earned a *licence*, a bachelor's degree, or an engineering certificate. So he undertook a first year of preparatory classes in Algiers, where he led the life of a normal young man, studying, to be sure, but also living with the exuberance of youth in the environment that Albert Camus describes in *Summer*.²¹ He loved music, was passionate about the cinema, and cruised around Algiers on his motorbike. His father had had him take some dance lessons and, says his sister, Anne-Marie, "he could dance the fox-trot, waltz, and cha-cha respectably." In human eyes, everything considered, he was on a typical track.

But things turned out totally differently. After this first year of preparatory classes for schools of engineering, to which he failed to gain admission, Pierre Claverie left at the start of the next school year for Grenoble to continue his preparation for the entrance examinations. He took ship for Marseille on the eve of November 1, 1957. What was he thinking about, leaning on the rail of the *Ville d'Alger*, as the city of his childhood disappeared in the haze? Was he still considering what had preoccupied him during the retreat at the priory of Orval in Belgium, at the end of scout camp in July? Or was he thinking about the way the political and security situation in Algeria was deteriorating? The Battle of Algiers had just ended with the arrest of Yacef Saadi on September 24, 1957. No one now could be unaware that exactly three years before, on November 1, 1954, a nationalist movement had begun a genuine insurrection in eastern Algeria, in the Aurès Mountains. Pierre Claverie was en route to his destiny; he was leaving an Algeria full of turmoil. He would return one day, but a very different person, filled with a passion finally to get to know the land of his childhood and youth. His whole life would be dedicated to reestablishing ties with this country. From this moment of his departure until his return in 1967, the world of his childhood would disintegrate in violence. Personal changes, profound and painful, were in his future also. It was on that day, November 1, 1957, that the weekly correspondence with his loved ones, which would make it possible to trace Pierre's path, week by week, for the next thirty-eight years, began.