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FATHER MAURICE BORRMANS, M.Afr. (1926-2017)

Father Maurice Borrmans, who died on 26 December 2017, is certainly sorely missed since he had become an authority in the field of Christian-Muslim relations, especially within Catholic circles in the French-speaking and Italian-speaking worlds. He was also highly respected by many Muslims.

Maurice Borrmans was born in the diocese of Lille, France. His formation as a priest within the Society of Missionaries of Africa (White Fathers) took place in North Africa, in Algeria first of all, and then in Tunisia. After his priestly ordination in 1949, he became one of the first students at the Manouba, in the suburbs of Tunisia, at the centre for Arabic and Islamic studies (the ancestor of the PISAI) which had been newly separated from IBLA. His two years at this institute were followed by three years at the University of Algiers. This prepared him for his future task as lecturer in both the Manouba and Rome, a task which he was to accomplish faithfully for a full fifty years, from 1954 to 2004.

While engaged in teaching, Maurice prepared a doctorate on family law in North Africa which he defended in the Sorbonne on 1 February 1971. His two theses were subsequently published: the main thesis, *Statut personnel et famille au Maghreb de 1940 à nos jours* (Mouton, Paris/La Haye 1977, 708 pp.), and the secondary thesis of a more documentary nature, *Documents sur la Famille au Maghreb de 1940 à nos jours* (Oriente Moderno, Rome 1979, 437 pp.).

Fr Borrmans also found time to look after the production of *Etudes Arabes*, a publication destined to help former students keep up their studies of Arabic. Each issue provided Arabic texts with translations into French, some being excerpts from literary texts, others of a more religious nature. Many of the translations were done by Borrmans himself. In these early years this publication was simply roneotyped. Maurice prepared the stencils himself, typing out at great speed both the Arabic and the French texts, turning them off on the gestetner, and then assembling the pages. For this latter task he would engage the help of the PISAI students and even the children of some of his Italian friends.

When in the mid-Seventies the decision was taken to publish a printed journal, the annual volume *Islamochristiana*, Fr Borrmans took on the task of editor. He occupied this position from 1975-1980, and again from 1985-2004. His long

experience in North Africa and his frequent participation in Christian-Muslim dialogues enabled him to persuade a number of Muslim academics to contribute to the journal.

The activities of Fr Borrmans extended beyond the PISAI. He was invited to give a regular course on Islamic Spirituality at the Urbanian University in Rome, and to teach Islamic Law at the Pontifical Oriental Institute. For many years he was a Consultor, i.e. an advisor, of the Secretariat for Non Christians (which later became the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue). At the dialogue that took place in Tripoli, Libya, in 1975, his presentation of the Christian message, written and delivered in Arabic, was highly appreciated. In his capacity as Consultor he was asked, together with Fr Ary Roest Crolius, S.J., to revise the little booklet of guidelines on dialogue with Muslims which had appeared already in 1969. The revised edition, considerably augmented, was published under his name with the title *Orientations pour un dialogue entre Chrétiens et Musulmans* (Cerf, Paris 1981). This was subsequently translated into different languages, including English and Arabic.

During his long stay in Rome, Fr Borrmans was often invited to give public lectures, in Italy and elsewhere (for instance, he regularly contributed to an annual conference organized by the Conventual Franciscans in Istanbul). His talks on these occasions, and also articles that had appeared in different journals, were made more easily available by being collected and published in a number of volumes: *Dialogue islamo-chrétien à temps et contretemps* (Editions Saint Paul, Versailles 2002), *Dialoguer avec les Musulmans. Une cause perdue ou une cause à gagner ?* (Téqui, Paris 2011) et *Chrétiens et musulmans, proches et lointains* (Médiaspaul, Paris 2015). Earlier he had provided a study on the way Muslims understand Jesus: *Jésus et les musulmans d'aujourd'hui* (Desclée, Paris 1996). In 2005 a new edition of this work, revised by the author, was published. In this book Borrmans does not confine his attention to the texts about Jesus in the Qur'an, but he also examines *tafsīr*, both ancient and modern, as well what is said about Jesus in Islamic "catechisms" and in books of *kalām*, and even the figure of Jesus as it is presented by modern Arabic authors and poets. The volume concludes with a chapter entitled "Jesus, an enigma or a mystery?"

Though he became a professor, Maurice Borrmans always remained a priest and he combined pastoral activity with his academic work. While at the Manouba, in Tunisia, he would go regularly to celebrate Mass in Porto Farina, and in Rome he helped in the parish of San Porziano. In the early 1980s he was asked to go to Bahrain. This exile from Rome was difficult for him, but he generously contributed to the Catholic community in the country, making good use of his knowledge of Arabic, English, French and Italian.

After this experience in the Gulf, Fr Borrmans returned to PISAI for a further twenty years. In 2004 he officially retired and joined the community of Missionaries of Africa in Sainte-Foi-lès-Lyon. Though retired, he remained active, and was often to be found back in Italy where he was well known and frequently invited to talk about Islam and Christian-Muslim relations. As has been noted above, it was during this period that two volumes of collected articles appeared. He continued to write and

publish, but perhaps with a change in perspective. He set himself to present some great figures of Christians who have been prominent in dialogue with Muslims. He thus produced a series of biographical studies: in 2005, the life of Jean-Muhammad Abd-El-Jalil, a Moroccan Muslim who became a Christian and a Franciscan, characterized as “a witness to the Qur’an and the Gospel”; in 2009, a presentation of four “prophets of Christian-Muslim dialogue”: Louis Massignon, Abd-El-Jalil, Louis Gardet and Georges Chehata Anawati; in 2010 a lengthier study of the life and work of Louis Gardet; and in 2016, a further gallery of “four actors in Christian-Muslim dialogue”: Roger Arnaldez, Robert Caspar, Jacques Jomier and Yoakim Moubarac. Together with Françoise Jacquin, in 2007 he edited the correspondence between Louis Massignon and Jean-Muhammad Abd-El-Jalil, and two years later he published the very interesting correspondence between two converts to Christianity from Islam, *Mehmet-Paul Mulla-Zadé et Jean-Muhammad Abdel-El-Jalil. Deux frères en Conversion ; du Coran à Jésus* (Cerf, Paris 2009). A prolific letter-writer himself, and a faithful guardian of all the letters he received, he published those sent to him by Fr Christian de Chergé, the prior of the Trappist monastery of Notre Dame de l’Atlas in Tibhirine, recently beatified, together with six other monks, among the 19 Martyrs of Algeria: *Lettre à un ami fraternel*, Bayard, Paris 2015.

As Don Valentino Cottini, the present editor of *Islamochristiana*, wrote already in 2011: “on account of his studies, his teaching, his work of mediation, the knowledge he accumulated and the relations which he developed in the course of over sixty years ... the life of Maurice Borrmans can be considered as a life entirely consecrated and given to the dialogue between Christians and Muslims” (*Islamochristiana* 37 [2011] 303).

