Where is God in suffering? Why does God allow women and men to experience pain? Why, would it seem, does God in his divine providence ask Christians to witness by suffering? If these questions are ones which exercise you then this film will add much grist to the mill. Based on a true story, the film is set in the Cistercian Monastery of Notre Dame d'Atlas in the Algerian mountain village of Tibhirine against the backdrop of the Algerian Civil War in which the rebel GIA (Groupe Islamique Armé/ al-Jama’ah al-Islamiyah al-Musallaha) vie with the Algerian army for tactical control of the area. In this ferment the monks find themselves increasingly at risk from the mounting violence, which eventually claimed the lives of six of the resident brothers and a visitor (Fr Bruno Lemarchand) on 27 March 1996. But they are also increasingly aware of their responsibilities as servants of the villagers with whom they enjoy a wonderfully tender relationship, seen particularly in Br Luc's role as doctor (played by Michael Lonsdale) and the interaction of Rabbia (Sabrina Ouazani) and the village elder Nouredine (Abdelhafid Metalasi) with the Community.

The pain of this dilemma is explored fully by Xavier Beauvois and it is particularly obvious during the Community meetings (well known to those of us who live in religious houses) that each monk finds it painful in a unique way. For the Abbot Dom Christian de Chergé (played by Lambert Wilson) there is the pain of reconciling his own love for Algeria and her "Islamic soul" (to quote his own testimony) with his understanding of his Abbatial responsibility which causes him to consider removing the Community from the Monastery; for Fr Christophe Lebreton (Olivier Raboudin) there is the pain of reconciling his "Dark Night" with his (understandable) sense of dread; for the aged Fr Amédée (played with wonderful innocence by Jacques Herlin), the ill Br Paul (Jean Marie Frin) and the slightly brusque Fr Célestin (Phillipe Laudenbach) there is the quandary of leaving the (dangerous) familiar for the (safe) unfamiliar.

The film never seeks to offer easy answers; instead it shows the power and witness of a love which can turn 'defeat' into 'victory'. Br Jean-Pierre (one of the two survivors along with Fr Amédée) now 87 was permitted to watch the film by his abbot (he now lives in Spain). Of the film he said that it gave him peace "to see his brothers again". May all who watch this film be inspired to embrace the often costly way of peace and may those who inspired it rest in peace and rise in glory.

It is available via the Amazon website.

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