

Interview with Bishop John MacWilliam Bishop of Laghouat in Algeria.



Bishop John MacWilliam, you were officially appointed as Bishop of Laghouat on the 16th March last; what were your feelings before you accepted?

My first thought, when the Apostolic Nuncio informed me of this decision of the Holy Father, was for my predecessor, Bishop Claude Rault, M.Afr who had waited for such a long time to be replaced as Bishop of Laghouat for reasons of age and health. As the Provincial of the White Fathers in the Maghreb, I was concerned for his well-being. I said to myself, “al hamdu lil-lah!” However, when the Nuncio told me I was his replacement, I was shocked because I never really thought about such a possibility. Very quickly, I realised that in Algeria today or even in the world, there were not that many priests of the right age, with the essential experience and fulfilling other basic criteria to be the Pastor of this very particular Diocese that is Laghouat. So, maybe I was not that bad as a choice. Then, as I am by nature someone for whom the pull of the call to the first mission is important, I did not hesitate too long before saying ‘yes.’

Your ordination will take place in Great Britain in May; why there? Will you have another ceremony with the Christians in your Diocese?

Yes, it is true that my ordination will take place in England. It will be at Worth Monastery (Benedictines) where I was at school and where I was ordained priest in 1992. It would be very difficult for my relatives and friends to come to Algeria. Moreover, the Diocese of Laghouat has only a small hall seating 80 people that also serves as the 'Cathedral' from time to time. Of course, shortly after my Episcopal ordination on the 20th May, I will be in Ghardaïa, my Episcopal seat, to celebrate my installation with the Christians of the Diocese, the White Fathers in Algeria and the other bishops of the country. We also wish to invite our many Muslim friends from the city for the feast after Mass and we have, therefore chosen a date just before the holy month of Ramadan.

In order not to exclude our Christian friends in the north of the country, I will preside at a Thanksgiving Mass at the Basilica of Our Lady of Africa ten days later. It will be the Feast of the Uganda Martyrs who are so dear to the Missionaries of Arica.

Bishop, could you briefly describe your Diocese to our readers? How big is it in comparison to Great Britain, the number of parishes, pastoral workers (how many congregations?), and the missionary work done there and dialogue with our brothers of the Muslim religion? Just give us an idea of the context in which you are going to work.

With the exception of the enormous dioceses of Russian Siberia, my diocese is the largest in the world. It is 10 times the size of Great Britain, (three times the size of France). In a population comprising four million Muslims who are very spread out, there are about ten small Christian communities of Sisters, Brothers, Priests and Laypeople. 'Chapels' serve as parish churches. In fact, we do not speak too much about parishes. The White Fathers have been present there since 1872 but have only two communities today at Ouargla (1875) and Ghardaïa (1887). There are communities of the spiritual family of Blessed Charles de Foucault, Missionary Sisters of our Lady of Africa, Franciscan Medical Missionaries and the Pontifical Institute of Foreign Missions. More recently, Sisters from congregations from Sub-Saharan Africa have arrived. Their congregations were founded by our confreres who themselves left for the mission from Algeria a long time ago. We also have three 'Fidei Donum' priests thanks to the generosity of their dioceses but we do not have any incardinated clergy in our Diocese. This means

that there are about sixty Christians working on behalf of the Diocese and nearly all are foreigners.

Our principal mission in Algeria is not ‘to do’ but ‘to be.’ To be present among the Muslim people who welcome us. In this spirit, we work – yes, there is work – in the apostolate which facilitates encounters with real life. We help handicapped children, educational support or tutoring for schoolchildren and adults. We run culture centres and libraries; we help with agricultural projects and many other things. In every town where we have communities there are authorised chaplains to prisons who make pastoral visits to detained Christians. Some University towns have students coming from sub-Saharan Africa and these make up an important element of the laity in the local Church. Here and there, migrants are coming for work or just passing through. There are zones which have important oil installations with many foreigners some of whom are Christians. However, we have little access to them for security reasons. Often these workers only come for a short time and normally find their pastoral support in their native countries.

According to the context you have described, what will be your pastoral priorities?

As a Bishop, I have the obligation to care for the “little flock” that is the Catholic Church in the Diocese. This implies close links with each of the faithful as well as with the religious communities and with those responsible for the congregations working in the Sahara mission. Despite our special circumstances, we are part, with the three dioceses in the north, of the Catholic Church in Algeria and more widely with the Episcopal Conference of the North Africa Region (*Conférence Episcopale de la Région du Nord de l’Afrique [CERNA]*). It seems to me to be very important that we recognise constantly our belonging to the Universal Church, especially as all the members of our local Church are originally coming from all over the world. The material and personnel support and in particular, the support of prayers is essential and in that respect, I need to continue the good work carried out by my predecessor to strengthen the links with the Church elsewhere.

On a curious note, would you be the first native English speaking Bishop appointed to Algeria?

Without having done any research into the matter, I believe that I am the first English speaking Catholic Bishop to be appointed to Algeria

which has been a French speaking territory for two centuries. However a number of years ago, the Anglican Church appointed my friend, Bishop Bill Musk, as Bishop for Tunisia/Algeria. I am very happy that he has accepted to be with us at my ordination in Worth.

Maybe the Missionary of Africa confreres would like to know what kind of relationships you will have with the Society of the Missionaries of Africa and what do you expect of the Society?

Since the Society arrived here nearly 150 years ago, the Bishop of the South has been a White Father. In fact, it was set up as a Vicariate and a Diocese of the White Fathers. However, for some time now, this is no longer the case. The White Fathers have only two communities now in the area and they are now just a congregation among many others and there is a convention between the Diocese and the White Fathers just like the others. I had the luck to have lived five years as a member of a White Father community in the service of the Diocese and more recently as Provincial of the Maghreb, I had very close relationships with my predecessor, Bishop Claude Rault. I hope that continues. We are all disciples of the same Master in the same mission. With the White Father community in Ghardaïa, I hope to find spiritual and fraternal support in line with our White Father Charism, which is deeply rooted in my heart without for all that interfering in what is proper to them. I admit that living alone outside community will be a sacrifice for me, being the White Father that I am.

A last word for our readers?

I believe that my appointment indicates that the Holy Father has not only confidence in me but also in the Society of the Missionaries of Africa, faithful to the vision of our Founder and wishing to bring the love of God in Jesus Christ to the peoples of Africa and in particular, our brothers and sisters of the Muslim faith in North Africa. The many messages of solidarity and promises of prayers encourage me and I thank God and all of you for all that.

Bishop John, Thank you and I wish you a fruitful apostolate in Laghouat

Freddy Kyombo

Ordination of John MacWilliam as Bishop of Laghouat

Worth Abbey, England, 20th May 2017



“Simon son of John, do you love me more than these others do?”
“Yes, Lord, you know I love you.”

Just as Simon did, you, John, have answered “yes”. That day the Nuncio called you, you did not have much time to reflect before answering yes to the invitation of our Holy Father, Pope Francis, to accept responsibility for the diocese of Laghouat. As proof of your consent we have the mandate that has just been read out.

Conscious that you have been chosen, and counting on the Spirit of the Lord that has been given to you, you have responded in effect: “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

You have answered confidently, I am sure, because you know that the love of God enfolds you as it has always enfolds you: in this place, Worth, in the years of your boyhood; during your service in the Armed Forces; and throughout all the time you have been serving as a priest in the Society of Missionaries of Africa.

You know with certainty that this love will continue to enfold you, whatever difficulties may come your way. This certainty is founded on the Rock of Christ, the one who “having loved his own who were in the world, loved them to the end”, the one whom we celebrate in this Eastertide, who has gone through his Passion and Death to rise to New Life, life which he wishes to share with all.

You have already held positions of responsibility, not only in the Army but also in the Church, as Superior of the community of the *Institut de Belles Lettres Arabes (IBLA)*, in Tunis, and as the Provincial Superior of the Missionaries of Africa in the Maghreb, but now, because of this loving response to the Lord, you are being given a new responsibility. Like Simon you hear the words: “Feed my lambs. Look after my sheep. Take into your loving care the people of the diocese of Laghouat.”

I would like you to notice that Jesus says to Simon: “Feed my lambs. Look after my sheep.” He is saying to you: Look after my people of Laghouat. Your love and your care are to be inclusive, universal. Allow me to quote Canon Law:

“A diocesan bishop is to show that he is concerned with all the Christian faithful who are committed to his care regardless of age, condition or nationality, both those who live within his territory and those who are staying in it temporarily” (cf. 383 #1).



Celebration of the installation of Bishop John in Ghardaïa

This last category would include not only those who come to work in the oil-fields, but also African students, or migrants who are crossing the Sahara dreaming of a better life.

The same Canon goes on to say:

“He is to consider non-baptized as being committed to him in the Lord so that there may shine upon them the charity of Christ for whom the bishop must be a witness before all” (cf.383 #4).

Accordingly, as you are well aware, your pastoral care is not to be confined to the few Catholics in the Diocese, but is to extend to the population of over four and a half million. If there is to be any preference in the persons to whom you direct your attention it will be for those mentioned by Isaiah in the first reading: the poor, those who are suffering, whose hearts are broken, and those who are in prison or who are bound in any way.

This Diocese that is being entrusted to you is indeed vast, and as we know, the desert is your cathedral. You will, as your coat of arms suggests, be piloting the bark of the Local Church on a sea of sand or, if you prefer, following across the dunes, and leading your people to follow the Lamb that was slain, but is still living. Yet this vast area is no “empty quarter”. I trust that you will discover that the love of God has been preceding you everywhere. In saying this, I am thinking of the work of your predecessors in this See of Laghouat: Charles Lavigerie, Charles Guérin, Henri Bardou, Louis David, Gustave Nouet, among the “ancestors in the faith”, and those I have known myself, Georges Mercier, Jean-Marie Raimbaud, Michel Gagnon, and Claude Rault, your immediate predecessor, who is happily with us today. I think too of all the Missionaries of Africa, both men and women, as well as other priests and religious and lay people, who have contributed to the life and work of the diocese, and those who are present in the diocese now whom you are called to lead, as their Good Shepherd. So I pray that you may grasp the breadth, the length, the height and the depth of the love of God, in order that you may be filled with the utter fullness of God (cf. Eph 3:18) and be able to share this with others.

Our Gospel passage ended with Jesus saying to Simon: “Feed my sheep”. It is good, I think, to consider also the following verses in this



The new Bishop receiving the Crozier

chapter of John’s Gospel. Jesus reminds Simon that “when you were young you put on your own belt and walked where you like”. You had that same freedom as a young man, although you committed yourself to obeying orders as a member of Her Majesty’s Forces, and then you pledged obedience to the Superior General of the Society of Missionaries of Africa. Today “somebody else” – and I am privileged to be that person – will not put a belt around you, but will give you a ring, and this ring will be a sign that you are tied, espoused to one diocese, to the diocese of Laghouat.

New ties will also be created, with the other bishops of Algeria, with all the members of the Conference of Bishops of the Region of North Africa, and also with the universal College of Bishops with Pope Francis at its head. So your concerns must grow ever wider, to embrace the whole of your diocese, the whole of the country to which you have been sent, the entire region, and indeed go out to the Universal Church.

So, with you and for you, let us pray that your love may grow ever deeper, wider, and yet remain eminently practical and effective, following the example of our founder, Charles Lavigerie, who exercised his pastoral ministry inspired by one all-embracing word: CHARITAS.

Homily of Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald

The Laghout Chair

The Apostolic succession

Some of them were « Apostolic Vicars »; others « Apostolic Prefects » and the last five were Titular Bishops



Bp. Charles
Lavigerie
1868-1891



Bp. Anatole
Toulotte
1891-1898



Bp. Augustin
Hacquard
1898-1901



Father Charles
Guérin
1901-1910



Father Henri Bardou
1911-1916



Father Louis David
1916-1919



Father Gustave
Nouet 1919-1941
(resigned 1941)



Bp. Georges
Mercier
1941-1968



Bp. Jean-Marie
Raimbaud
1968-1989



Bp. Michel Gagnon
1989-2004



Bp. Claude Rault
2004-2017



Bp. John
MacWilliam
2017...