

## Bob Mokry in Marrakech, Morocco

As you can see, the title of this blog is "Marrakech Express". It's not too original since, of course, it's the title of a late 60s song by Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young. It refers to taking a train from Casablanca to the one-time drug mecca of Marrakesh -- a train that still runs regularly. The title is common place, and, if anyone would bother to Google it, you'd find lots of hits with all sorts of interesting subjects.

So lacking originality, but as one who was a youth in the late 60s, now heading to Marrakech (by plane), I chose the title simply to indicate that this will contain newspaper-like accounts of my stay and work in Marrakech.

After nearly twenty years of teaching and administrative work, in various capacities, and at a crossroads in my life, I was fortunate to have had a sabbatical year, during which time I was able to discern where I was being led or called on the journey of life. And our Franciscan missions in Morocco seemed to summon most loudly. So, I got permission from my Provincial and Council to spend a three-year stint there.

I hope to write something each month about my experiences, and will circulate it to friends who I think might be interested in seeing it; but I will not leave it open to the general public on the Internet. Those who want off the list and others who are not yet on my list, but might like to be, can contact me at: [bob.mokry@franciscanfriars.ca](mailto:bob.mokry@franciscanfriars.ca)

So, here we go . . .

### Leaving Edmonton for Marrakech



I'll be leaving Edmonton on October 8. As you can see from the picture of our friary, we're into Fall, and most of the leaves on the tall ash trees have fallen.



Perhaps this picture of the street on which I live will give you a clearer

idea of the extent to which Fall has beset us.



It isn't too grim yet, and this tele-photo of the river valley, just on the other side of our front door, gives you some idea of the colour and warmth that we're still experiencing.

Our current temperatures are around 20-25 C. during the day and down to around 9 C. in the evenings; although a week ago, we had frost. When I get to Morocco on the 14th of October, I can expect temperatures pretty much similar to those I'm now experiencing.

Well, enough dribble for the time being. As you might guess, I'm writing this and incorporating these photos so that I can experiment and get this blog running.

I thought it was about time that I let you know what I've been doing since I arrived in Morocco.

The President of the Franciscan Foundation and his council decided that, for the first while, I should bear down and learn some Arabic and improve my French. But, I arrived a week too late to enrol in the Institut Français's advanced French course, which was booked up, and which would not have openings until January. Likewise, the beginner's Arabic course had started, and although I might have caught up for the week that I was late, we explored the possibility of my being inserted into a Moroccan family in a small village outside of Marrakech. Unfortunately that opportunity, which I was looking forward to, fell through and, by that time, it was too late to register. I was then left scrambling to learn some Arabic on my own.



I should say that I'm learning "Moroccan Arabic", or "dialectal Arabic", as it is known, which really is the street language of the majority of uneducated and even educated people. This is quite different from standard modern Arabic which is spoken on TV and radio, and which is found in most newspapers and magazines. Although the Moroccan Arabic language is now written in Arabic characters, it is essentially an oral language, with many differences in pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar from standard Arabic; most modern Arabic dictionaries and grammars are of



little use. That having been said, I do have an elementary text book, and some CDs which I plug away at on my own. I also have the help of a neighbour lady, Chantal Chrétien-Pomares, who was born here in Marrakech and has never left, who grew up side by side with Moroccan neighbours and friends in the medina, and who is, all things said and done, a native speaker. We try to meet three times a week, but there are often interruptions of one sort or another.

In addition to spending time on Arabic, almost immediately after I arrived, I began to participate in the weekly roster of saying masses in the parish and at the sisters' convents. Typically all the priests either preside at mass and preach or they concelebrate. Obviously, in a non-Christian missionary country such as Morocco, sources of income for the church are limited; and the stipends for the daily celebration of masses -- often made available to us from the Archdiocese of Rabat or from Europe -- enable us to supplement a minimal income. It is difficult to find remuneration for professional work among the local people for two basic reasons: local unemployment is more than 20% and even higher for labourers; and for that reason, it is not easy for foreigners to get a "carte de sejour" to work (other than for non-residents starting businesses here, for embassies, for some foreign companies, and for the church where positions cannot be filled by locals).

O.k., digressions aside. I've been helping out at week-day masses in the parish. These are always celebrated at 6:30 p.m., and the number of attendants varies from about 5-20 on any given evening. You've already seen some pictures of the church, so I'll spare you that. There are two different convents that we go to: the FMMs, or Franciscan Missionaries of Mary; and the Soeurs des Saints-Coeurs de Jésus et de Marie.



The FMM community is made up of sisters from different countries: there is a polish nurse, an African student, and the rest, most of whom are retired but still do different work, are French. They help out with "Caritas", the European equivalent of CCODP (Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace), go to the prisons, work with "Associations" (charities that help the handicapped, or provide training and education for the poor, which are usually foreign established and supported, and which aim at having the local Moroccans continue the work that was



started), and they help in the church as catechists, etc. To the top left is a picture of the front entrance to the FMMs convent, which is where I go for 7:30 a.m. masses. And, to the right is a picture of Mary Donlon, former FMM provincial of Morocco and now Superior General, myself, and Ivica Pavlovic, o.f.m., guardian and pastor of the parish. We friars were invited over to their place for dinner, while they were having a regional meeting.

The "Saints-Coeurs" are a community of four Lebanese sisters. Their congregation was asked to come to Morocco by the Archdiocese, in the early 70s, to establish schools here in Marrakech and elsewhere. This was at a time when the French had pretty much left and there was a large "arabization" move within the country. Many of the schools that had existed, and which were filled predominantly by Moroccan students, were abandoned. So, the Archdiocese invited Arabic speaking sisters to come to take over the schools -- and they were able to teach and administer in Arabic. The Moroccan government was happy, the Church still continued to witness and to help the country in a real way, and parents were very happy to have their children receive a good education. Today, their elementary school, called "El Saadia", has a lay, Arab, Moslem staff of 45 teachers, and more than 1000 students.



Here is a picture of the entrance to their convent, which is also where the teachers and staff enter. The students' entrance is to the right in this photo, which brings them



through a gymnasium area into a courtyard and a much larger extension of classrooms. This other photo is a walled in area (all places are walled in) to the left of the convent entrance, which contains a bit of a playground area and another long wing of classrooms. Typically mass is celebrated for the four sisters Monday to Friday at 7.00 a.m.

Anyway, when I go to these communities, which is far from being every day, I'm usually the priest who presides, so, as in the parish, I'm preparing homilies. That takes quite an effort and a fair amount of time, on my part; and probably a lot of patience on everyone else's part. Although time consuming, this

is a good exercise; and since I'm not getting any formal instruction in French, this is kind of a "self-study program"!

So, that's kind of my daily, weekly, routine; but throw in answering doors, and telephones, doing odd jobs, helping occasionally to prepare meals, doing supper dishes, and other interruptions.



There have been a few events that changed my usual routine. First of all in early November, I went to Rabat, to Notre Dame de la Paix retreat house, to take in three days of



"Priests Days" -- a kind of "professional development" time.

The retreat house (on the left) is a former sisters' convent from protectorate times, probably given to the Church, and now well used for all sorts of diocesan gatherings. There have been some additions such as a large indepent building which serves as a dining room behind it, and a chapel and basement meeting hall, to the right, which is physically attached. The walled-in grounds are quite large, for being in the centre of the "new part" of Rabat, and have some nice paths, interesting trees, and pretty flowers.



The neighbourhood is pretty up-scale: the French Embassy is just down the street.



There are some new apartment buildings (on the left),



and a nice park, which has gate posts indicating the recent



establishment, in 1921, of the dynasty from which the present king comes (double click the photo to see the inscription). The first king of this dynasty was, of course, established by the French during Protectorate times; he was one of the most important and powerful chieftains of the various clans and families which governed Morocco prior to that time.

Well, this was the location for "Priests' Days". There were also some interesting discussions. We began with a Moroccan gentleman who spoke to us about Human Rights in the country. It's not a pretty picture from many perspectives; and one wonders how or whether things will change; but of course we live in hope, as do most Moroccans. Most of the time was spent discussing Islamo-Christian

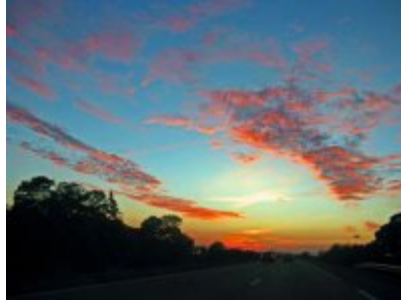


Dialogues. Père Étienne Renaud, a former Minister General of the White Fathers, and former professor at PISAI (Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies) in Rome, was the presenter. He gave an overview of Islamo-Christian relations since Benedict XVI's Regensburg address, and the ensuing invitation by 138 Moslem theologians and leaders for Christian leaders to enter into a dialogue on the theme of "Love" in the two religious traditions. It was at the very time that we were meeting that 17 religious leaders were meeting in Rome to begin this dialogue, which had become, unfortunately, more or less a Catholic-Islamic dialogue, rather than a larger Christian-Islamic dialogue. In addition to presenting the background, Étienne was also able to speak about various theological themes and their differences within both religions, and able to indicate common points for



continuing dialogue. A good number of the priests were able to share, in the small group discussions, about their own experiences of "dialogue" on various levels and in various ways. There was a good turn out of priests and "brothers" (no women were present!), given that the archdiocese doesn't have a lot of priests; and, of course, the archbishop, Vincent Landel (on the right) was present throughout, and the papal nuncio (Antonio Sozzo, on the left) showed up on the last day.

I should mention that I had my own limited experience of "interreligious dialogue" on the train on my way up to Rabat. Shortly after Gilles and I found a compartment, we were joined by two young students, and a family with two children. One of the students was what we call a "barbu", a bearded one, in other words an "intégrist" or fundamentalist Moslem. It wasn't long before he pulled out his Coran, and tried to engage Gilles in conversation, asking him what he thought about Morocco and Moroccan culture, etc. Gilles mumbled some responses, which of course opened the way for more conversation. But Gilles, after nearly 60 years in the country, had little patience and soon buried his head in a newspaper. Then, it was my turn: I'll spare you the details of the long conversation that sooned involved the older Moroccan



gentleman and the other young student. Suffice it to say that the older gentleman was much more broad-minded than the intégrist and able to correct the young man on aspects of interpretation of the Coran and contemporary application. It certainly provided me with the opportunity to hear a diversity of thought within Islam. My return to Marrakech was less exciting, since two other friars and myself drove back. The most inspirational moment was watching the sunset!

Another change in my routine took place just last week-end. I went up to Rabat again, this time to



attend a Meeting of the Friends of Charles de Foucauld. Charles de Foucauld seems to have inspired a number of people, mostly French and of a "certain age", in the Moroccan church. His story, as recounted by Père Antoine Chatelard (a member of the religious congregation of The Little Brothers of Jesus, which was founded in the early 1930s by a diocesan priest who was inspired by Ch. de F.), was very interesting. Antoine has recently written a biography, in French, but also translated into other languages, of Charles, entitled *Charles de Foucauld -- Le Chemin vers Tamanrasset*.

Charles, orphaned as a child, and raised by his grandfather and cousin, a second mother, was sent to military school, became an avowed atheist, and then served in Algeria, a Département, or colony, of France. Around 1884, after he had finished his military service, he decided to travel in regions of Algeria and Morocco, and, it seems, was moved by adventure, and possibly by the search for fame and fortune. Bear in mind that at this time, the National Geographical Societies of England, Germany, and France were paying people to go into unexplored regions and record very detailed accounts of the geography, culture and society, down to the percentage of men who had guns! Morocco was, generally speaking, closed to foreigners. But Charles, having prepared himself in advance by learning the language and as much as he could about the geography, disguised himself as a Jew and travelled with a merchant Rabbi from Jerusalem. There were large numbers of indigenous Moroccan Jewish settlements, and he was relatively well accepted among them. His interest, however, was in the larger population of Moslem Moroccans, and, it seems, he was moved by their religiosity and expression of faith. After about a year in Morocco, in 1886, he returned to France, and re-entered the Church. He spent the next seven years with the Trappists at a monastery in Syria; then left them to become a hermit in Jerusalem, where he became the chaplain to a convent of Poor Clares. After about two years, he moved on again, and

returned to Algeria where he stopped at several places for an extended time, and where he travelled to the extreme south and established himself in the vicinity of a French outpost, at Tamanrasset, for the last fifteen years of his life. During this time, he lived alone, among the Moslems, reading, writing and meditating; and, as it seems, developing a spirituality of "Christian presence and witness". Because there were no Christians, he could seldom celebrate mass, and could not have the "reserved presence"; all of which adds an interesting dimension to his notion of "real Christian presence". There is a certain amount of mystery surrounding his death: it seems, however, because he was somehow attached to the French outpost, he was killed, in 1916, in an uprising against the French domination of the region.

Morocco was made a Protectorate of France in 1912, before Charles de Foucauld was killed. After his death, and especially after the Protectorate of Morocco was well established and a large French population had relocated itself to Morocco, Charles's story and some of his writings became known. These were popular reading throughout France, and were an inspiration to many Christians who were here and who undoubtedly had to ask themselves some questions about living in the presence of a



predominantly Moslem people.

It was in the mid- to late-20s and early

30s that a large Franciscan presence became established in Morocco. Some of these friars, e.g. Père Charles André Poissonière, became locally known as the first follower of Charles -- in the sense that he was trying to live a life of total insertion among the poor Moroccans. In fact, Charles



established a hermitage, and then was later joined

by two other friars, outside of Tazert, about 50 km from Marrakech, which was a Moslem and Jewish settlement. His Christian witness was simply helping the desperately poor Moroccan people, and he himself died while nursing many of them during an outbreak of diphtheria.

Of course, not everyone is inspired by Charles de Foucauld, and there is an opinion, generally held by Moroccans and some French, that his short stay in Morocco was to "spy" for France's future intrusion into, and desired overtake of, Morocco (as they had done in Algeria). And, I think, that while this might not have been his express desire, certainly his contact with and writing for the National Geographical Society of France contributed indirectly to France's eventual entry into Morocco. As for his influence on Franciscans, it has to be said that Charles himself was influenced by certain aspects of the life of Francis. But, it seems to me, judging from a later generation of friars some of whom are still around, that a number of the early 20th century Franciscans in Morocco were more influenced by Charles than by Francis of Assisi!



Well Advent has just begun, not that it means too much for most Moroccans, but Christmas preparations are already going up in some of the stores! Even here!

Cold weather is beginning to settle in. It's been overcast and rainy today, and will be for the next three days, with a forecasted high of 11 C. on Tuesday. Hopefully it won't last too long.