

Letter from Morocco

Toumliline travels: A trip to Morocco's forgotten monastery



Justin Robinson OSB

Today it is monkeys, not monks, that wander the cloisters of Toumliline, a former Benedictine monastery in the Middle Atlas mountains of Morocco. Perched on a hillside above the town of Azrou – about ninety minutes south of Fez – some twenty monks hailing from En-Calcat Abbey near Toulouse once called this place home.

Arriving towards the end of the French protectorate in Morocco, from the very beginning the monks attempted to distance themselves from colonial rule and live close to the native people when they founded the monastery in October 1952.

They soon set about learning Arabic and Berber, forging ties with nationalist leaders and Islamic religious authorities, teaching in the local secondary school and establishing a medical dispensary, boarding school and farm.

Hospitality

Benedictines place great importance on hospitality, thus the monks sought to welcome pilgrims, travellers and locals to Toumliline. They showed kindness to Moroccan prisoners sent to work in the vicinity of the monastery by serving them mint tea beneath the hot sun, much to the annoyance of the French soldiers guarding them. Soon meetings began to be organised to exchange views and encourage understanding between foreign visitors and local people, French settlers and Moroccan natives, Christians, Muslims, Jews and others.

The bold step of hosting a summer camp for the Istiqlal Party in 1955 would mark a turning point in the monas-

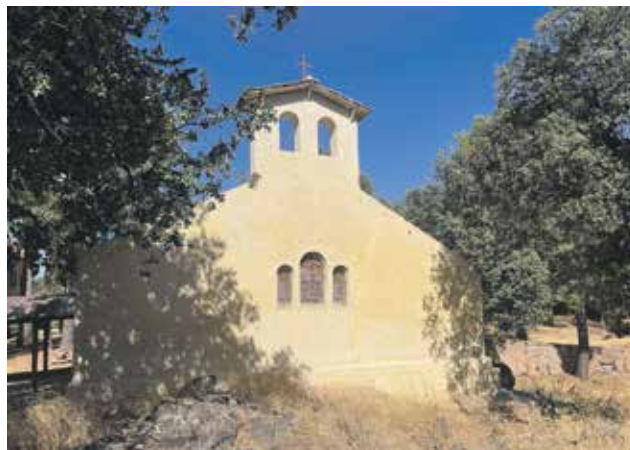
tery's history. Outlawed by the French authorities, the party was then at the forefront of the struggle for Moroccan independence. After independence was achieved in 1956, the monks' gesture of hospitality was not forgotten: the new government invited the monastic community to host annual conferences of reflection and discussion, transforming Toumliline into an unexpected place of dialogue and encounter.

The first 'International Meeting' was held at Toumliline in August 1956. In the years that followed, hundreds of participants from across the world gathered annually for lectures and debates that explored not only intercultural and interfaith questions but also pressing issues of state-building, education, economics, labour, industrialisation, family life, and the role of women.

Held under the patronage of King Mohammed V – and often attended or presided over by members of the royal family – the meetings drew politicians, philosophers, academics, and religious thinkers. Among them were leading figures such as Emmanuel Levinas and Louis Massignon.

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The monastery was flourishing, and gaining international importance and recognition. Its success was such that it founded two new monastic communities elsewhere in Africa, yet the dwindling number of its own monks and political tensions in the country conspired to bring about Toumliline's



Toumliline church exterior gable



Toumliline church exterior



Toumliline monastery cloister



A discussion during Toumliline's International Meeting (Fondation memoires pour l'Avenir)



Prince Moulay Hassan and Archbishop Amedee Lefevre eat together during a lunch break at the International Meeting (Fondation memoires pour l'Avenir)



Toumliline's superior Fr Denis Martin OSB received by King Mohammed V



Young people debate during Toumliline's International Meeting (Fondation memoires pour l'Avenir)



Small group discussions at Toumliline's International Meeting (Fondation memoires pour l'Avenir)

eventual closure in June 1968.

Today, the monastery is abandoned. Only the walls remain of its former school buildings, whilst the conference centre that once welcomed royalty and farmers alike has fallen into ruin. Barbary monkeys wander freely through the grounds, and local youths come to explore a place where the echoes of Gregorian chant, Muslim

prayer, academic debate and interfaith dialogue once mingled but sound no more.

Stands

Happily, the church still stands along with the monastery's buildings – monastic cells, library, chapter room, and refectory – all in good condition, though unused for more than half a century. Government support, foreign aid, and private donations help ensure that what remains of Toumliline continues to endure. Small but important renovations were undertaken when the monastery served as the filming location for the award-winning movie *Of Gods and Men*, which recounts the

martyrdom of the monks of Tibhirine in neighbouring Algeria.

My visit to Toumliline feels like a pilgrimage – a gesture of gratitude and homage to Benedictines who, like me, understood the value of deep engagement with the Arab and Islamic world. We seem well suited to this task, with the late Pope Francis once noting how “the Benedictines have always been recognized for their commitment to ecumenism and interreligious dialogue,” and encouraging us “to continue in this important work for the Church and for the world, placing also at her service your cus-

tomary hospitality.”

As I leave Toumliline, I notice a Qur'anic inscription at the monastery gate, reminding visitors that God has made us “into peoples and tribes so that you may know one another” (49:13). I give thanks for these pioneering monks and their efforts to help us know one another better in the light of the Gospel, and my mind whirls with thoughts about how we might continue their mission into the future.

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