

Bl. Denise Leclerc (Sr. Bibiane)
(France/Algeria) 1930-1995, Martyr
*Assigned to a maternity ward in Algeria
working with infants and new mothers.¹*



Denise Leclerc was born on January 8, 1930, in Gazeran, Yvelines, France near Paris. She was the eldest of eight children in a peasant family. From an early age, she helped her mother with the household. The family moved to Roye in the department of Somme. Denise attended the Jeanne d'Arc school of home economics. She kept busy with school, farm work and helping with her brothers and sisters. Though she wanted to be a religious sister, she delayed entry until her brother and then a sister, Odile, could finish their studies.

At the age of 29, Denise joined the Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of the Apostles (OLA) on March 4, 1959, in the Mother House of Venissieux, near Lyon. Denise took the religious habit on March 8, 1961, taking the name Sister Bibiane, in honor of Saint Bibiana, virgin and martyr of the 4th century. At the end of her novitiate, she was sent to Constantine, Algeria, located in the north-east where she joined a community of sixteen religious sisters and worked on a maternity ward caring for infants and new mothers.

In 1964 Sister Bibiane was assigned to teach sewing and embroidery to young people in the Belcourt district of Algiers, the capital of Algeria, at a home economics center for poor girls. On March 8, 1967, in Algeria, Sister Bibiane professed perpetual vows.² In 1970, she earned a professional diploma in sewing followed by one in embroidery, each conferred by the academic inspectorate of the city of Algiers. In addition to instructing, she encouraged the girls. With her additional degrees and leadership skills, she was appointed the Director of the School of Industrial and Decorative Arts in Algiers. Amongst the sisters with whom she worked was a OLA Sister, Angele-Marie, who was from Tunis. Sister Angele-Marie (Jeanne Littlejohn) had initially worked at an orphanage and boarding school for young girls in Bouzarea, Algeria, and was later assigned to Algiers. She would be martyred with Sister Bibiane.

In 1980, Sister Bibiane was appointed to a small community composed of two other sisters. She stood firm in her faith when one day an Islamist disturbed her lessons attempting to force her to teach the Koran. In 1994, as threats to foreigners became more frequent, the superior general of the Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of the Apostles consulted the sister in Algeria to determine if they wanted to leave or stay. After dedicating over thirty years of her life to the mission in Algeria, and now at the height of the Algerian Civil War, Sister Bibiane responded: It was the people themselves who asked for Sisters. Now they're asking us to stay. I am very grieved, I feel helpless in the face of so much suffering, but I know, God loves these people and I have great confidence in Our Lady of Africa. Jesus said, 'The father will give you everything you ask for in my name.' His light helps me to discover wonders that are hidden, amazing solidarity, generosity, superhuman courage, the spirit is at work in their heart. The Word of God helps me to stay tuned - to be a glimmer of hope: I choose to stay.³

On Sunday, September 3, 1995, Sister Bibiane and Sister Angele-Marie Littlejohn went to the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass with the Salesian sisters. At 7:15 p.m. they left the nun's chapel and walked home. They lived at number 105 Benlouzaid. When they arrived a number 92, they were hit by a hail of bullets, martyred by Islamic forces. Though they had taken the necessary precautions, it appeared that someone had been stalking them.² Both had been missionaries in Algeria for over thirty years. Sister Bibiane (65) and Sister Angele-Marie (62) died on September 3, 1995, in the Belcourt area of the capital of Algeria.



Sr. Angele Marie OLA and Sr. Bibiane OLA, Algerian Martyrs. Photo: (c) OLA Archives

Both were declared venerable with the promulgation of the decree of martyrdom on January 26, 2018, and beatified on December 8, 2018,⁴ both by Pope Francis. The beatification ceremony for the 19 Martyrs of Algeria was held at the Shrine of Our Lady of the Holy Cross in Oran. (Memorial - May 8).



Nineteen (19) Martyrs of Algeria (1994-1996)

There were three nurses among the 19 beatified martyrs of Algeria killed between May 8, 1994, and August 1, 1996. The martyrs were men and women from eight different congregations. Through their martyrdom, they witnessed to the universal love of Christ.¹

The 19 martyred are: Sister Paul-Helene Saint-Raymond, Brother Henri Vergès, Sister Esther Paniagua Alonso, Sister Caridad Álvarez Martín, Fr. Jean Chevillard, Fr. Alain Dieulangard, Fr. Charles Deckers, Fr. Christian Chessel, Sister Angèle-Marie Littlejohn, Sister Bibiane Leclercq, and Sister Odette Prévost; The seven Trappist monks of Tibhrine, who were kidnapped in March 1996 and killed in May 1996: Brother Luc Dochier, Brother Christian de Chergé, Brother Christophe Lebreton, Brother Michel Fleury, Brother Bruno Lemarchand, Brother Célestin Ringeard, and Brother Paul Favre-Miville. Their story was dramatized in the 2010 French film *Of Gods and Men*. The last of the 19 to be martyred was Bishop Pierre Claverie, a French Algerian, the Bishop of Oran from 1981, who was killed on August 1, 1996.²

References:

- 1) "Blessed Dénise Leclerc". CatholicSaints.Info. 16 September 2018. Web. 8 December 2021. <<https://catholicsaints.info/blessed-denise-leclerc/>>
- 2) Emilia Flocchini (4 Dec 2018). Blessed Bibiane (Denise) Leclercq, Virgin and Martyr. Accessed 16 April 2022. <http://www.santiebeati.it/dettaglio/97813>
- 3) Society of African Missions. (20 Nov 2019). During 'Week of Witness' we remember two OLA Beatified Martyrs. Accessed 16 April 2022. <https://sma.ie/two-ola-sisters-beatified-in-algeria/>

4) Hagiography Circle: An Online Resource on Contemporary Hagiography. Martyrs of Algeria (1994-1996). Denise Leclerc (Bibiane). Accessed 16 April 2022.
<http://newsaints.faithweb.com/martyrs/Algeria.htm>

5) Congregazione delle Cause dei Santi. 19 Martyrs of Algeria. Accessed 4 June 2022.
<http://www.causesanti.va/it/santi-e-beati/19-martiri-d-algeria.html>

Note: This biography is for all desiring to grow in holiness and follow His Holiness Pope Pius XI address to 2000 nurses assembled at Castel Gondolfo on August 27, 1935 for the II World Congress of Catholic Nurses (www.ciciams.org / www.nacn-usa.org): *to first and foremost bring the Christian supernatural, Christ to our patients, bring salvation to souls.* May it also help nursing students with your Nursing History course. Source: Diana L. Ruzicka (2022). *The Book of Nurse Saints*. Available at www.lulu.com/spotlight/Ruzicka