

**Bl. Paul-Helene Saint Raymond
(France/Algeria) (1927-1994), Martyr**

*Worked as a nurse in poor, working class neighborhoods
in Rouen, France.*

*In 1964, worked as a nurse and social worker in Algeria for 30 years.
Murdered by Muslim fundamentalists.³*



Helene-Saint Raymond was born on January 24, 1927, in Paris France. She was the eighth of ten children born into a pious family.

Helene initially studied at Sainte-Marie college in Neuilly and then graduated from the Sorbonne in Paris, France, with a degree in physical sciences and chemistry. At the Sorbonne, she participated in the center for Catholic students created by Abbot Charles (Center Richelieu) and also served as President. It was at the Sorbonne that she met the Little Sisters of the Assumption. Later, she would follow a colleague from her time at the Sorbonne who became a Little Sister of the Assumption and invited her to take the habit in 1949.

Following graduation, Helene worked two years as an engineer in the French Petroleum Institute in Rueil-Malmaison. Before entering religious life, she also did an internship in a cardboard factory in Bagnolet to experience the harsh working conditions.

Helene entered the Little Sisters of the Assumption in 1952 and on July 29, 1954, she made her first vows taking the name Sister Paul-Helene. She was sent to Creil (1954-1957) where she worked as a family social worker and nurse. She formally studied nursing in 1957 and, initially, worked as a nurse in the poor working class neighborhoods in Rouen, France. She made her final vows in 1960.

In 1963, Sister Paul-Helene left for Algiers, Algeria, where she ran the Medico-Social Center in Belcourt serving as the head nurse. "She was a whirlwind of activity so that she would exhaust fellow sisters and had to be told to go easy on them. She became so skilled she could perform minor surgery."⁴ In 1974, she was sent to Tunis, Tunisia, for a year and then to Casablanca (1975-1984), where she was responsible for caring for premature babies with an entirely Moroccan team. She also cared for those who had to live in hiding.

In 1984, she returned to Algeria, working in Boukhari, a town 180 kilometers south of Algiers. She reported in a letter, "It's important, interesting and obscure work. There is no nursery, no kindergarten, no family workers. Until now, the big family was enough for everything, but times are changing." This experience was difficult.

In 1988, she was again sent to the Belcourt community in Algiers. She retired from nursing and in September 1988, began working at the library of the Kasbah run by the Marist Brothers. She was obliged to change her route to work each day as tension arose in the country. In October 1990, they suffered an earthquake which caused many homes to collapse. In a 1993, Sister Paul Helene shared in a letter to her congregation:⁵

I hasten to tell you that we normally continue to go to work, do our shopping, pray, while having suppressed for a long time: walks outside and outings in the evening. Pray for us and for those around us... At the Kasbah library where I have been working for five years, there are still so many young people. We are continuing to develop the collection in Arabic which is essential to them. The relationship between the young people and our team is unchanged. Likewise in our house in the Casbah, two sisters welcome around a hundred young girls, women and children

every week for sewing, knitting and tutoring. The “center” is growing. Where you have to be careful is where you are not known. We choose the places to do the shopping and in the evening we do not exceed 7 p. m. / 8 p.m. return. We have obviously given up on any walk — country, sea or mountain. Because of the small number of Christians, we know each other and the relations are very fraternal. The bishops, these days in particular, visit the small communities, to realize the particular situations.

Reflecting on the violence that then reigned, she wrote that “one must start oneself to fight against one’s own violence.” When Bishop of Algiers, Mgr. Teissier warned her of the dangers that they all were facing and gave her the choice of leaving or staying, she responded, “*Father, our lives are already given anyway.*” Sister Paul-Helene wrote a last letter before Easter in 1994:⁵

The situation continues to worsen. If last summer we spoke of hidden war, we must now say: we are in full “civil war.” The marquis [*a Salafist movement of Sunni Muslims, now renamed al Qaida in Maghreb, which advocates a return to the traditions of “pious predecessors.”*] in the mountainous regions control the villages and make their ruthless and ferocious law reign – in the cities: assassinations, rockets, sabotages multiply and strike anywhere, anytime, anyone. As for everyday life, refueling is so difficult and expensive that the worry of knowing what we are going to put in the pot and how we are going to complete the month, including for those who are lucky enough to have a salary and that it is paid regularly — this concern occupies the minds and in a certain way creates a diversion! And yet in the midst of despair and anguish, life goes on: people help each other, take their lives into their own hands, reflect. The victory of life over death at Easter morning was hardly apparent...

On May 8, 1994, at the beginning of the afternoon, three men appeared at the library saying, “Police” and asked to see the chief. As Sister Paul-Helene directed them to Brother Verges’ office, they shot her in the back of the neck. Then they shot Brother Verges in the face. They were the first two victims of the 19 Martyrs of Algeria.⁴

Sister Paul-Helene Saint Raymond died on May 8, 1994, at the age of 67 at the Archdiocesan library on Ben Cheneb Street in the Kasbah in Algiers. Her funeral mass was celebrated at the Basilica of Our Lady of Africa. She was declared venerable with the promulgation of the decree of martyrdom on January 26, 2018, and beatified on December 8, 2018,⁶ 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 Ringear, 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) Congregazione delle Cause dei Santi. 19 Martyrs of Algeria (1994-2002). Accessed 4 June 2022. <http://www.causesanti.va/it/santi-e-beati/19-martiri-d-algeria.html>
- 2) Catholic News Agency (14 Sep 2018). Algerian martyrs to be beatified in December. Accessed 16 April 2022. <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/39384/algerian-martyrs-to-be-beatified-in-December>
- 3) "Blessed Paul-Hélène Saint Raymond". CatholicSaints.Info. 16 October 2019. Web. 11 April 2022. <https://catholicsaints.info/blessed-paul-helene-saint-raymond/>
- 4) Catholic Saints Guy (13 February 2018). Accessed 16 April 2022. <https://catholicsaintsguy.wordpress.com/2018/02/13/algerian-martyr-sister-paul-helene-saint-raymond/>
- 5) Sister Madeleine Remond. (13 Dec 2018). Paul-Helene Saint-Raymond, first of the nineteen Martyrs of Algeria. Petites Soeurs de l'Assumption. Accessed 16 April 2022. <https://assumption-psa.org/paul-helene-saint-raymond-premiere-des-dix-neuf-martyrs-dalgerie-2/>
- 6) Hagiography Circle: An Online Resource on Contemporary Hagiography. Martyrs of Algeria (1994-1996). Helene Saint Raymond (Paul-Helene of Gethsemani). Accessed 16 April 2022. <http://newsaints.faithweb.com/martyrs/Algeria.htm>

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