



# des Hommes et des Dieux

Un Film de Xavier Beauvois



# DES HOMMES ET DES DIEUX - OF GODS AND MEN

*(France, 2010, d. Xavier Beauvois)*

---

One of the finest religious films, and one of the best Catholic films, in years.

The subject is the Trappist community of Mt Atlas, Algeria, in the 1990s. Living their monastic life amongst the local people and ministering to them, especially with medical services, they were viewed more and more with suspicion, especially because they were French expatriates, by government troops who were becoming more active against the increasing terrorist attacks, and by the terrorists themselves. Seven of them were killed in the latter part of May, 1996.

While the film expertly builds up the background of post-colonial Algeria, corrupt government, extreme Islamists, the role of the military, the violence perpetrated by both sides, the centre of the film is the life and preparation for death of the monks.



Filmed in Morocco, the film is both beautiful and austere in its landscapes and in the interiors of the monastery – and in the interior lives of the monks and their commitment to God and to their order.

The director, Xavier Beauvois, shows an instinct for depicting the detail of monastic life with sensitivity and a strong awareness of what it means. The actors look, move, speak and act as if they were authentic monks. Lambert Wilson shows the complexity of a man elected to be superior but who has a tendency to make decisions himself but is willing to be guided in discernment by the whole community. Veteran Michael Lonsdale is the ageing doctor who shows practical wisdom in his medical skills and down-to-earth counsel as well as in his religious life.

The film is able to cover all aspects of the religious routine of the monastery in accurate detail. In fact, it communicates the life and spirit, the prayer, Eucharist, sung liturgy, silence and contemplation, the detachment of the vow of poverty, the taken-for-granted sacrifices of the vow of chastity, the work, the meals and the readings, the community meetings, the outreach. This is shown in episodes throughout the film which are as effective, even more effective, than a documentary.

All the time, the audience is challenged to wonder what they would do in such dangerous circumstances, especially after official advice from the area is given, recommending the monks leave and return to France. At a community gathering, the superior asks them all to give voice to whether each wanted to stay or leave. Some speak in favour of leaving and explain why: family, illness, the opportunity to continue their work elsewhere. Some are still uncertain. Others wish to stay, intuitively knowing that this is where God wanted them to be. After the advice to leave, the monks listen to the opinions of the local people, especially those who come to the monastery for medical help. Their argument is that the monks remain in solidarity with the people.

For an audience wanting to know and understand something deeper about Christian spirituality, something deeper underlying, despite the sins and failures of the church and of church people and the consequent anger at abuse and scandals, these scenes offer a great deal to ponder.

So does the letter that the superior writes before the monks are abducted in vans, audio-taped for their identity, knowing that they are hostages, and led into the snow and the mountains to their deaths. He goes over the decisions and the motivation but also acknowledges that the monks have lived in a Muslim country with its Quranic ideals and spirituality and its God, far from the fanaticism of those who do not really read their scriptures fully or are caught up in bellicose righteousness.

Faced with the reality of impending death, like many a religious or a secular hero, they found their depths, despite any fear, and discovered a martyr's saintliness in giving a life for others. The director offers this very movingly, without words, as the community sit to enjoy something of a last supper together, the camera focusing on each, their smiles, then their tears, then their deep resignation, drinking a glass of wine together, and all to the rhythms and melodies of Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake.

Perhaps this makes it sound as if the film is offering a sermon rather than a movie story. It is a movie first and foremost and that is how it delivers its message, through story and in words and moving images.

---