

André BIRRAUX
1920-1996

He did not fear travels. Death, neither. Overwhelmed by a heart attack as sudden as it was violent, our brother André BIRRAUX has just left for the great and last trip, in late afternoon on Wednesday, October 9. Between the Lot-et-Garonne that he had left at the beginning of the month and St-Joseph at Issy-les-Moulineaux where he was to come, André had wished to stay a few days with his family in the beautiful city of Annecy. It is there at that stopover that ended the life among us of the one that doctors friendly called "death-dodger". Nothing could ever stop him and he would have supported with difficulty to live in a "retirement home" as we say.

In one of the few writings that he left, dated January 1989, he writes "68 years old this year! Until now I thought I was young. And now suddenly I feel old! Is it the change of life that occurred six months ago when I came back from Africa? Or is it the small health problems?... Probably the two of them combined and working together. The result is a difficulty to live... But am I destined to get old? I don't know but that doesn't worry me. Age comes with a certain wisdom that leads to abandon oneself in the hands of God. Lord, I'm ready (willing) to go when you will want; I feel detached from all earthly pleasure and on the other hand I'm anxious to go get the answer to my life long question. If there is YOU, as I hope and believe it, what joy!... If there were nothing... than no more questions! It would be too stupid, but without any post mortem effect."

Is it the quest to his lifelong question that has prompted André to travel so much?... Nobody will ever know, but it is sure that this friendly, sympathetic, welcoming, profoundly optimistic and learned man has searched a lot, has read much and traveled much. He was born at Thonon-les-Bains on November 23, 1920. He got to know the Don Bosco Salesians through their youth centers. He began a novitiate with them in 1937. Always with the Salesians, he left for Oran, in Algeria, and then to the grand seminary of Constantine. When the war began, he was drafted: Algeria, Morocco, Sicily, Italy... He met with paratroopers with whom he had a very good relationship that we know of.

When he was discharged, he went to the Mission de France in 1945, and in 1946 he is a coal miner at Montceau-les-Mines. From there he entered the grand seminary at Meaux where he ended his studies and was ordained a priest in Fontainebleau in 1949. He was appointed parish vicar. When he is there, he contacts the Sons of Charity in 1952. After his novitiate he was appointed to Clichy, then to St-Bruno in Issy-les-Moulineaux and to Grand-Quevilly. Then he leaves for three years in Tamanrasset, until 1963. After a year in Bezons as chaplain to the gypsies, he goes back to Africa for nearly 25 years: first at Bamako, then the port of Abidjan, then the port at Pointe-Noire. When he came back to

France he lived until now in the Lot-et-Garonne, first at Sainte-Livrade then at Castelmoron, where he greeted many African friends.

André was a fraternal man, joyful and always available, only listening to his heart, never to his illnesses. His door was always opened; to greet and to give. He was a man of relationships and faithfulness. In Castelmoron, where there is a very living protestant community and where many people from the Maghreb, André was well known by many and liked to visit some and make contacts.

A year after his return from Africa André, for a time, had as he wrote “some incoherent wishes”:

of strict community life (like that of a monk)

or of a small pastoral appointment but independent

or of just plain retirement

or a return to Africa to fulfill humble and discreet tasks, brotherly service, being present... but in an atmosphere of exuberance, youth and simple life.”

André was in a quest for life, youth and brotherhood. He gave his life without retaining anything; he was a man of heart until the end. His many friends in Africa and France can bear witness to that.

Today, to fulfill his expectations, he meets God who is ALL LOVE and LIFE abundantly, the “God of his youth”, to whom he gave himself forever.

Let us pray together for André.

Regional Council of France

Translated by *Lorenzo Lortie fc*