

Homage to Father Jacques Hamel

Jacques Hamel: “Country priest” and martyr

Father Jacques Hamel's throat was cut this Tuesday morning, 26 July in an attack carried out by Daesh, while he was taking mass at the Church of Saint-Étienne in Saint-Etienne-du-Rouvray (Seine-Maritime), where he had served for 15 years.

'Discreet, even silent, but very caring' is how he will be remembered by Auguste Moanda, priest of the parish of Saint-Etienne-du-Rouvray. Respected by the locals and very active in the parish, the 85 year old led a Bible study group and gave catechism lessons until last year. “He did all that was asked of his and was a great support to Father Auguste. He lived for his faith and for others”, says Linda Dupré, long time resident of the parish of Saint-Étienne, who also remembers: “When meetings went on and on, he always had something to say which would make us laugh.”

Born in 1930 in Darnétal, Jacques Hamel was ordained as a priest in 1958. In 2008 he celebrated his golden jubilee (50 years as a priest): “After mass, we shared a meal. He was very happy”, a worshipper remembers. The abbé mostly worked in parishes, notably at Saint-Antoine-de-Petit, Quevilly and at Saint-Pierre-lès-Elbeuf, in Seine-Maritime. By nature a conscientious worker, even 'courageous', the priest was well known in the diocese of Rouen for having refused to retire at 75, 'to keep serving the community by saying mass and giving the sacraments'. Aware of the lack of priests in the countryside, “He took the gospels seriously and put his heart into his work”, we were told by Pierre Belhache, curate of the parish from 2005 to 2011 and now at Saint-Sever-Saint-Clément in Rouen. “He never refused a task.”

According to Father Auguste Moanda, the current curate, he lived an ordinary spiritual life of 'sensitivity'. For example, Father Auguste, confirmed that; “I never saw him in a clerical collar”. “He lived in the presbytery next to the Church of Saint-Étienne. He was a very simple person,” recalls Father Pierre Belhache again. “He never went into flights of rhetoric in his sermons”, says a parishioner, “He was easy to follow and kept close to the texts”.

Affected by the second world war, “he ardently wished for a lasting peace on our continent,” added Father Augustine. He maintained good links with the Muslim community in the district, without being involved directly in dialogue between the Christians and Muslims. Mohamed Karabila, representative of the regional Muslim Council, hailed him as “a man of peace, defending a peaceful and open view of religion.”

Faithful to his convictions, Father Jacques Hamel, in his last parish letter in June 2016, asked that holidays be a 'time of prayer'. “Let us pray for those who have most need of it, for peace, for a better life together,” he wrote, “that we can at this time hear God's call to take care of the world, and to make where we live a warmer world, more human, more brotherly.” Words that sound today like the testament of a man of faith and dialogue.

Source: Article by Élise Koutnouyan, with Jean-Claude Noyé and Isabelle Franq, published in the magazine *La Vie* on 26 July 2016.