

Weavers of fraternity in fragility

Truly – the Mission is God's

Pier Luigi Maccalli, sma

Father Pierluigi Maccalli of the Society of African Missions (SMA) was a missionary in Niger when he was kidnapped in September 2018 and held prisoner in Mali by the Support Group for Islam and Muslims (GSIM). He regained his freedom on October 8, 2020 along with three other hostages: the Malian politician, Soumaila Cissé, the French humanitarian worker, Sophie Pétronin, and an Italian, Nicola Chiacchio, who were his fellow prisoners for over a year. On November 9, 2020, he was received in a private audience by Pope Francis. Here he confides his feelings to us and the discovery of another face of the mission.

I was kidnapped by Muslim mujahideen on the night of September 17, 2018 and held captive for over two years in the Sahara desert in Mali. They arrived suddenly and took me away from the Bomoanga mission in Niger in pajamas and slippers. This is how I experienced my kenosis: stripped of everything, deprived of freedom and chained.

I had ten years of mission in Côte d'Ivoire and eleven years in Niger. Throughout that period in Africa I had always tried to combine the Gospel and human promotion. I was active on the frontiers of charity: schools, dispensaries and maternity, a nutritional center for malnourished and orphaned children, care for the marginalized and handicapped, wells and pumps... The kidnapping was for me an inner reversal, it abruptly turned my life as a happy missionary upside down.

After the initial inner upheaval, I asked myself: "How can I be a missionary in this particular situation?". I remembered my missionary creed which is summed up in a phrase by the Jesuit François Varillon: "What man makes human, God divinizes". I could try to make my relationships with my captors human. They had rifles in their hands, they watched me, they put me in chains, but they were still men, people. So I tried to create a dialogue with them, as far as possible, with the four words that I learned in Arabic. And I saw that, although minimal, a relationship was created.

Toothpaste for toothache

I remember a mujahideen bringing me bread. He wanted to learn to read numbers in French. I prepared a piece of paper for him and he, every evening, came to repeat the lesson and see if he had learned what I had taught him. Before we separated at the end of my captivity, I left him my backpack and he gave me his. We made this exchange as if to keep a memory of each other.

To another mujahideen, who I saw suffering from a toothache, I gave some mint toothpaste I had. I suggested to him that he put it in cavity and it worked. Once, he even came to wake me up late at night, because he was in pain. So for a month he "cured" himself with

toothpaste. Then the situation worsened and they took him to get the tooth extracted. But for a month we had been going on with my "magic toothpaste".

Many of the kidnappers were very young, just boys; the average age was 20, one was only 13 years old. The team leaders were between 30-35 years old. Most were illiterate young people, boys indoctrinated by the propaganda videos they watched on the phones they always had in their hands, deluded by the idea of living a kind of Islam and doing something great for Allah. They made me so sad. As a missionary I had spent a lot of energy offering young people a different future – young people are the strength of Africa – and seeing those young people waste their lives hugging a Kalashnikov and possibly killing others made me so sad. The path of violence and war would not lead them anywhere but would only produce innocent victims. I prayed for them, my persecutors, and said, "Lord, they don't know what they are *doing*. Help me to live forgiveness, to seek paths of peace, to build fraternity with humility".

Forgiveness, humility, fraternity

Another episode, which struck me and also did me good, occurred with Abdurrahman. He was the team leader who organized the surveillance shifts. I had complained to him that one of his team had not been very kind to me. I said, "I have lived in Africa for over 21 years and I have never seen a young man 'speak ill' to an old man." I was considered, in fact, the old man in the group and they called me *shebani* ("old" in Arabic or Tuareg). On February 5, 2020, he came to tell me: "The negotiations are concluded and soon you hostages will be free, but before you leave I want to say sorry to *shebani*. I apologize if any of us mujahideen have disrespected you with their words or rude gestures." I was surprised and I replied immediately, without thinking twice: "I thank you, I welcome this word of yours and I assure you that there is no resentment in me". I welcomed and offered forgiveness with all my heart, convinced that it is only from there that the new world that we, missionaries, try to witness to and take everywhere can be born.

I remember one last episode. On the day of liberation, October 8, 2020, I was in the car with the leader (the only one who understood the French well) and I told him: "I have a word to leave you before leaving". "What do you want to tell me?" "May God make us understand one day that we are all brothers and sisters." He reacted instinctively and said, "No, no, absolutely not! Only those who are Muslims are brothers to me." I did not reply. I cannot know how much of what I had said remained in his heart but the proposal of fraternity sums up the whole teaching of the Gospel: we are all brothers, children of God-Father. Fraternity is the horizon towards which we all tend and which we call the kingdom of God.

I thought they had stolen two years of my mission

Returning to the story of imprisonment, after the first six months of solitude I was reunited with Luca, a young man from Padua kidnapped three months after me. In August 2019 Nicola also arrived. So, for a while, we were three Italians. I said to them several times: "Thank you for being there!" The loneliness had been heavy and being together and being able to share what you go through helped me. We supported each other and that was fortunate. Even when, due to opposing opinions or views, we had some arguments, everything always ended by us saying to each other, "Sorry, it's the situation we are in. We are prisoners, we are exasperated and we are living on the edge". The weight of

imprisonment wore us out. We also went through moments of friction and nervousness, but we always understood each other. We hoped it would end soon...

I thought I had been forgotten, but I was wrong. The messages I received when I got back to Italy moved me to tears. I felt an enormous embrace that heartened me, so much affection that I did not imagine. The first big embrace came from my family and I was very moved. The welcome home from my country and the diocese of Crema has also been powerful: for two years they faithfully organized vigils and prayer processions on the 17th of every month. Internationally, my SMA community and many friends prayed and implored God for my deliverance. I was really amazed, surprised and touched by the concern and closeness of everyone to me. I did not believe that there could be so much sharing in my situation. Many people also wrote to me from Spain, France, Togo, Benin, Argentina...

I thought they had stolen two years of my mission but I realize that they have been two fruitful years for the Church, for many communities and also for the same mission of Bomoanga in Niger from where many people have phoned me: "We are happy that you are free, we danced in the church at the announcement of your liberation. We are close to you. Do not think of coming now, the weather is difficult, we hope to see you again one day. Thank you, you have given us so much!" Yet, in these two years I had apparently given nothing, I had simply prayed and tried to resist, to exist, hoping that one day I could return to be close to my family and the people I love. I am surprised and amazed to see how this experience of imprisonment and complete inactivity has produced much more solidarity and openness of hearts than all my missionary work. *Truly, the mission is God's!*