

SEDOS - Ariccia - 8 May 2024

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Mission in Conflict Zones and Healing

1. My 'story' is not just one of two years spent as a hostage....

I am an S.M.A. Missionary (African Missions Society, founded in 1856 for the proclamation of the Gospel in Africa) and I served in West Africa for 21 years (Ivory Coast and Niger). My missionary commitment has always had service to life as its *focus*. I think *Mission* means to serve life and bear witness to the God of Life. This is why I have always combined the Gospel and Human Advancement.

The Good News/Word of God became flesh has always motivated the many social initiatives and commitments that have characterized me. My social pastoral work has always been divided into three areas: Health + School + Development. That is, cure sick life (**health**), offer a future to children (**school**/education) and help people to stand on their own feet (**development**).

- **Health** = I was interested in the Sinking of Wells, Maternity, Nutrition Centre, for malnourished people and orphans from birth, the care of people with handicaps. The Bomoanga Mission also provided a Pharmacy-Dispensary for the population.

- **School** = I obtained scholarships for families that could not afford the school fees for their children; I organized literacy courses for adults and in particular women. I also hoped to start an Agricultural High School in Bomoanga.

- **Development** = Training weeks for farmers (teaching them new techniques such as the use of the plough) and first employment for young apprentices (petty trades/petit métiers). Learn how to manage Climate Change and the shortage of rain (see quick mile).

But ... everything came to a stop on 17 September 2018.

2. In my book entitled '**Catene di libertà**'/**Chains of Freedom**, I recount how I was kidnapped (and my inner journey).... Below I note some of the most significant dates:

📅 17 September 2018 ... kidnapped

📅 5 October 2018 ... chained

📅 28 October 2018 = 1st video and then the Sahara for six months alone; ... later, the company of Luca and Nicola

📅 14 September 2019 ... chained every night (from dusk to dawn).

📅 5 February 2020 ... hope of release

📅 11 September 2020 = last video

📅 8 October 2020 = set free.

It was a misfortune that surprised me and left a profound mark on me, but it also taught me something else: about prayer, about mission, about my faith ... going back to the essential.

2.1 — **Missionary in chains:** my prayer, deprived of my set of books (Breviary, Bible, Mass...), was enriched by the prayer of tears and prayer from the heart. When they chained me up (on 5 October 2018, they put a chain around my ankle and fixed the other end to a tree. I was chained there for 22 consecutive days). I uttered all my despair and cried out to God; asked him many questions: *why did you abandon me? Lord, how long will you forget me? O Lord, make haste to help me....*

They took me to the desert with its sand dunes and for an entire year the Sahara was my open-air prison; I could only get them to take off my chains. But the chains were applied again on 10/14/2019 after a hostage had attempted to escape at night. Since then, my feet were chained every night up until I was set free/released. Indeed ... I can assure you that those chains were extremely uncomfortable.

But, even though it may seem paradoxical to you, I may say that those very chains opened up a free space. I said to myself: **"Although my feet are chained, my heart is not"**. I prayed for the peripheries of the world and like little Thérèse of Lisieux I understood (while being in chains) what the Founder of the SMA said: *'to be a missionary from the bottom of one's heart'*. Prayer from the heart was my free space. My heartfelt prayer intertwined (still intertwines) these three verbs: **breathing** God, **speaking to** God and **loving like** God.

Breathing God => Every morning I breathed in life deeply. At sunrise ... *I said to myself Gigi resist, (the first time was on 28 October 2018 when they made the 1st video of me)... that is R-ESIST = exist day after day.*

Talking to God => I didn't use any formula but had a lively heart to heart with God: I proposed faces/people and situations and my ardent desire for peace ... and I prayed for those who persecute peace.

Loving like God => Simone Weil: I borrowed some words of hers to express what I had intuitively felt. In the book *Waiting for God* she wrote: *'In misfortune God is absent... but it is precisely there that the faithful soul loves like God, boundlessly, and perceives the beyond of God who always loves freely'*. I did nothing, absolutely nothing for over two years, I prayed and loved empty-handed. Prayer was punctuated by my cloth rosary and by the sequence of Pentecost to the Holy Spirit. Maria and the Holy Spirit were my companions during my captivity.

Prayer (my cloth rosary) was how I communicated with God and the world. Today, prayer means to overcome solitude/loneliness! That desert enabled me to perceive/explore the essential. In that state of deprivation and spiritual aridity I realized **that the essential factor for a full life is RELATIONSHIP.**

During my imprisonment what I missed most was not being able to communicate with my family/my community. I almost felt *'physical pain'* at the thought that this misadventure was causing my family much distress. I was subjected to great discomfort: always being in the open, sleeping on a mat, eating the same food and drinking water that tasted of petrol ... but all that deprivation didn't weigh on me as much as not being able to communicate. **Relationship is life.** Relationship is what is at the heart of human experience; freedom and the communion of Love are vital. I missed these privileges very much!

In that solitude I understood (and have had confirmation) that the essence of mission is to humanize relations. In my years on mission in Niger my pastoral work has always been inspired by the French Jesuit,

Fr. François Varillon's adage: "*what man humanizes, God divinizes*". I also applied this principle to the *mujahideen*: treating the sore on the calf of one of them, relieving Abdul Haq's toothache, teaching Abel Nour to count in French ... and little by little I came to realize that they themselves *were the hostages*.

I am convinced that the essential stance in conflict is dialogue and encounter, never confrontation. War never resolves conflict. With effort/patience and above all strengthened by Jesus' words "*love your enemies*" (Mt 5:44) I chose to forgive. I don't bear any hatred/grudge, I feel at peace. I also explicitly said this to Abu Naser on the day of my release (8 Oct. 2020): "**may God help us to understand that we are all brothers, one day**". I offered him my human fellowship. I am convinced that only forgiveness and the outstretched hand of fellowship can build the bridge of peace. ("God has created all human beings equal in rights, duties and dignity, and has called them to live together as brothers and sisters". *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, Abu Dhabi, 4 February 2019).

2.2 — Doing what is essential: to claim to save the world by one's conduct/work has changed. For two years I did nothing and I thought that they had robbed me of two years of positive mission work, but I realized (upon my return) that those two inactive years were the most fruitful of my entire active ministry = **Missio Dei!** This experience has enabled me to make a synthesis between the two dimensions of mission: I have understood the strong connection between the missionary value of the contemplatives' life and the contemplative value of missionaries.

I do not deny the 'practical' value of mission work which is expressed with work in hospitals, schools, development projects (which is how we translate the compassion of Christ who touches and heals), but after my time in the desert I think it is important to start again from the essential: what I express as **keeping silent, making-space, doing together**. Ours is a time of crisis/epochal transition, but it is certainly a great opportunity to go in-depth **to what is essential**.

1 — Be silent: The Mission is from God (*Missio Dei*). From my experience in the desert I discovered that God is silence, that silence is God's communication and that prayer harmonises the two forms of silence. Then start again: with less ritual and more spirituality. The Apostles had already made this choice: "We will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:5).

2 — Making space: being an open and welcoming Church to all (as the Pope repeats). The image of the *shekina* (tent) is a good description of the Church *going forth*. I have seen the Tuareg's tents in the desert: they are roofs without walls and there is room for everyone. No walls, no barbed wire, but welcoming communities.

3 — Doing things together: promoting everyone's skills in a cooperative spirit. Being a Church that "**values listening**" (see *Pastoral Care of the Mat*), encounter and dialogue. We are interconnected, working together (= co-responsibility: lay people — religious — young-families)....

2.3 — My conversion: the God who was beside me is the God of the Cross. Like him, I was defeated (helpless) and fixed to the cross by having been kidnapped, but this discomfiture transformed my misfortune and suffering into a different understanding of faith. Yes, God is impotent/powerless; his sole power is the power of Love. God is exclusively/essentially Love.

God is not omnipotent (this is an ambiguous epithet). The omnipotence of God is the omnipotence of love: Love is omnipotent! Sometimes it is said: God can do anything! No, God cannot do everything. God can only do what love can do, because he is nothing else but love. And every time we leave the sphere of love we deceive ourselves about God and turn to some Jupiter instead. This is my reappraisal of the image of God.

God-Love is powerless when faced with the rejection of his love which he always respects. Jesus on the Cross is an innocent victim of evildoers (= people who wrong him). He receives the evil and succumbs to it (*dies*); he can only transform it into love (forgive them). The Cross shows us the true face of God, who is only Love. God does not transform evil into goodness (it is incorrect to say this because evil remains evil), but he transforms it into love. This is the Christian novelty. God is unarmed; God is powerless before those who feel free to do evil. God works only with the power of love that draws others to him: *"and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself"* (Jn 12:32).

Jesus is my reference. I see God through the eyes of Jesus of Nazareth. **God is like Jesus** = loves like Jesus, gives himself like Jesus, shares our life and dies like Jesus. *"No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the father, he has made him known.... This is the testimony of John"* (Jn 1:18-19). **My God is like Jesus.**

3. My convictions matured after having been kidnapped: Living the conflict — Cultivating the contemplative dimension that espouses solidarity with the innocent victims of history — Going to the essential

3.1. Living within conflict

Life is a struggle: no life exists without opposition. All life is conflictual (simultaneous presence of + and —).

Example: the relationship between children and parents (and between siblings); the teacher — pupil relationship; employer and workers ... and also in sports, in love/friendships, with Creation (environment/climate). Anyone who does not know how to manage conflict is destined to perish, even more so a missionary. The mission is (always) going like sheep among wolves....

Talking about conflict is not synonymous with war: war envisages the elimination of the enemy, whoever kills wins = massacres. Conflict certainly does not require the elimination of the other (see husband-wife, teenager-parent, neighbour/s).

We must not be afraid of conflict, **we must fear violence and war** and learn to disarm it. As a former hostage and a free man I say and repeat: let's disarm the **word**! Altercation is the spark that ignites every conflict. From the word/insult we pass to action, **to blows**/punches and if these hands are armed we may commit murder or feminicide, or go to war. Let's disarm the word to disarm the **gaze** and learn to see ourselves not as enemies but as brothers/sisters (*FT*, n. 279) (*at least as human beings*). Let's disarm the word to disarm the **heart** and learn to welcome everyone.

3.2 Prayer and Solidarity with innocent /defenceless pain as contemplatives: rush mat and apron

The first Bishop of Niamey (Hippolyte Berlier) spoke of **the pastoral care of the mat/of A House Among Houses**. Stay-with, listen to, and learn the local language. In other words it means: sharing, con-soling, shared-suffering, com-munion, con-tact.... Live in solidarity with the least and **with** the most abandoned/destitute.

The Bishop of Molfetta (Don Tonino Bello) wrote that the *habitus* of the priest is the *stole* and the *apron* which makes of him a **contemplative**, that is, a man of prayer and service... (I take this as a paradigm that can be extended to all missionaries). (*Regarding innocent/hapless pain, I refer you to Chapter 3 of my book Liberate Peace*).

3.3 I think it is essential to bear witness to non-violence and to promote/liberate peace

These two words express the horizon of my commitment that sprang from my misadventure as a hostage of war. Today, I think the message in Mt 5-7 is central and strong; in it I see the heart of the Gospel and the Kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus. Non-violence/Peace is the quintessence of the proclamation of the Good News.

I conclude with what I wrote to Pope Francis ... at the end of last February.

Dear Pope Francis,

I wrote this book of mine 'Liberate la Pace' as an echo of your invitation to look at war through the eyes of the victims (see *FT*. n. 261). I was kidnapped and spent over two years in the Sahel. This misfortune has led to reflections and considerations on the urgency of Liberating Peace today.

The war engulfed me while I was a missionary in Bomoanga in Niger. I suffered imprisonment and chains for over two years, but above all I saw the 'ugliness and senselessness' of the war in the Sahel and that violence never produces peace. I prayed, I cried, I forgave... and today I am at peace.

The piecemeal Third World War that we are helplessly witnessing confirms my conviction that it is urgent today to say a strong word about Peace. I dream and hope to read, one day, in a Papal Encyclical, a strong declaration that abolishes war without any ifs or buts. It is time to free the Church and Christians from the confusion of believing in powers other than the logic of love, forgiveness and non-violence. (...)

I await and hope for a strong and clear word on PEACE, removing all the ambiguities of the case... of those who still want to safeguard the just war or defense. I agree with Don Primo Mazzolari, who prophetically said in his book 'You do not kill' (1957) "Every war is fratricide, an insult to God and man. Either all wars are condemned, or all wars are accepted. One exception is enough to let all crimes pass."

In the meantime, I'm personally committed to it...

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