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## After his liberation, Father Micalli recounts his ordeal: “Even in chains I remained a missionary”

The long-awaited news arrived on October 8th: "Father Gigi Maccalli has been freed in Mali". The missionary member of the African Mission Society (SMA) was kidnapped on the night of September 17, 2018 while serving in a parish of Bomoanga, Niger, near the border with Burkina Faso, by an armed group. Father **Pier Luigi Maccalli**, now quarantined in his hometown, Madignano, recounts to SIR his dramatic ordeal. **Father Gigi, how did your abduction come about? During the two years of kidnapping, were you moved from place to place many times?** At first I thought of an armed robbery. When I asked them who they were, the next day, they said I could call them jihadists or terrorists. *Only on the 40th day, when I had reached the dunes of the Sahara desert, they announced on video that I had been kidnapped by GISM - Group to Support Islam and Muslims, an organization branched out of AQMI (Al Quaida au Maghreb Islamique).* Initially, they transferred me to different locations many times, especially if they heard sounds of drones. I crossed the multi-faced Sahara desert (its sand, shrubs, stones) from south-east to west towards Mauritania and then from west to north-east towards Algeria, eventually spending the last 7 months in the Kidal area between the 3 Mali-Algeria-Niger borders. It's a rough guess that we Italian hostages (Luca Tacchetto, Nicola Chiacchio and I) share based on our knowledge of that territory.



The Lord girded me with strength, I am sure about this. I cried, prayed and invoked Blessed Mary and the Holy Spirit. For two years I was surrounded by silence, in sadness, kept in total isolation since all communication with the outside world was cut off. My deepest sorrow as a missionary in Africa for 21 years (10 years in the Ivory Coast and 11 years in Niger) was to see young people (my captors and jailers) indoctrinated by propaganda videos praising Jihad and violence.

**I felt I had failed as a missionary who always preached and believed in non-violence as a path to progress and peace.**

My efforts for the formation of youths and children who represent the living and dynamic force for a new - or at least different - Africa, an Africa untouched by corruption and widespread injustice... suffered a terrible blow, I felt defeated. **Were you afraid to die?** The more the days passed and the less I feared a tragic end, even though I was prepared for anything. Except once. I received a verbal threat, from a mujahidin. He said he would put a bullet in my head at the first opportunity. It was the ninth month of imprisonment. Those words or threats made me more guarded and attentive. *I realized that my every word and action could be interpreted as defiance.*



It was my strength, and it grew stronger in the ordeal.

**I could not celebrate the Eucharist, nor read the Word of God, I was stripped of everything and occasionally chained, but I remained steadfast in the faith.**

I travelled through darkness, and several times I cried out to God with Jesus on the cross: "Father, why have you forsaken me?" It was a calvary from which I resurrected and I can now celebrate with Psalm 125: "When the Lord broke our chains, it was like a dream, all mouths burst out in rejoice, hymns flourished throughout." **Some of your fellow prisoners converted to Islam. Were you under a lot of pressure? Did your refusal place you at greater risk?** As for my companions of doom, all I can say is that it was out of convenience, a way to protect themselves against the worst scenario, since it is the belief of these zealous and fanatic Muslims that whoever kills a harmless Muslim goes straight to hell. They attempted it with me too. *When they exerted pressure on me, I resorted to the stratagem of telling them that it shall happen when God wills, since everything is scripted by God and nobody is above the rules of God.* Until, the last night before being freed, one of the chiefs said to me in French: "We must tell you and warn you for your own good to keep you from going to hell. Allah will hold me accountable for you, because I kidnapped a non-believer and did not tell him to convert to Islam." I thanked them for their solicitude and benevolence towards me, but I replied that I remained a disciple of Jesus Son of Mary and accept God's judgment whatever it may be. **Have you ever lost hope of returning home?** *Every evening at sunset I would say: even today is over, let us hope for tomorrow!*



I welcomed the message with some reservations because we had been told that it would soon be over already before. On February 5, 2020 we were given a deadline: "You will be free within a week and maybe even less." That day we celebrated and shared sweets and dates with our jailers but nothing happened. In July and August they videotaped us and said that probably we would be free within 10 or 20 days. It was a double disappointment. I feared that something would go wrong this time too, although we were informed that on Sunday, October 4th, more than 100 jihadist prisoners had been released from Bamako's prisons and RFI considered this event as a bargaining chip for

hostage release. *I was living those days with hope and caution and I entrusted myself to Our Lady of the Rosary undoer of knots (October 7). What's the situation in the Sahel today?*

**It was a powder keg, now it exploded!**

The alert level rose with my kidnapping in the Niger-Burkina Faso border area, and in Niger this year the whole country was declared unsafe after the murder of 6 aid workers of a French NGO last August. Unsafe areas stretch from Mali to Niger through Burkina Faso, with incursions and attacks of non-state armed groups. **SMA Superior General said he was impressed by your invitation to forgiveness, to fraternity, in the hope that an understanding with the Jihadists may be reached...** I feel sad for the young jihadists that were my jailers and wardens. Almost all of them were illiterate and indoctrinated to the mirage of a twisted conception of Islam, fighting for Allah and imposing shariah on all Muslims.

**I hold no grudge against them for what they put me through, for "they don't know what they are doing."**

I wished to the person in charge of our captivity during the past year, and who accompanied us to the place of our liberation, that one day "may God make us understand that we are all brothers."



**How important is missionary activity in these territories?** Mission means bearing witness to fraternity on a daily basis; building bridges of universal human fraternity. Mission means combating ignorance and illiteracy with the weapons of dialogue and non-violence, with humility and patience.

**What man humanizes, God deifies," said François Varillon, "this is my missionary creed.**

**Do you plan to return to the mission?** The mission is not a matter of geographical location but of the heart. My founder used to say: "Be a missionary from the depths of your heart." This is what inspired my service in Africa and Italy during ten years of missionary animation. The mission is the essence of the Church. We are all disciples-missionaries, called and mandated. *Even in chains I was a missionary. In fact, chains helped me to better understand the Missio Dei. I used to think that two years of life and mission had been taken away from me, I realize today that they were two years of fruitful ministry in Africa and Italy that I would never have expected.* Of course, Bomoanga (Niger), the mission from which I was so tragically torn away, has a special place in my heart. Now I am in touch with them by phone, I can finally communicate with them at least with my voice. They celebrated my liberation with dances of joy in the church in Bomoanga. I know that they are struggling with attacks by armed groups who want to sow terror in the area. No priest has celebrated the Eucharist there for two years now. *Father Mauro ( confrere serving in Niamey-Niger) told them that "for now it's not possible, maybe next year they will see me again."* *Insh'Allah is my personal comment.*

Gigliola Alfaro