

## Fr Maccalli freed after two years of captivity in west Africa

### Freedom attributed to Our Lady and the SMA Founder



Our National Novena in honour of the Little Flower, St Thérèse of Lisieux, finished on the Feastday of the Little Flower, 1 October. Included in the petitions each evening was one for the liberation of our SMA colleague, Fr Pierluigi (Gigi) Maccalli, who was kidnapped by an extremist group linked to Al Qaeda. Fr Gigi was in his mission in Bomoanga, Niger, when a group of men kidnapped him over two years ago. With no definite evidence of his situation we stormed heaven with prayer. Last April a brief video was posted by his captors, through a French News Agency, showing him to be still alive, even if looking tired and thin.

So our prayers for his release continued. Thousands of our supporters stormed heaven with prayer, including prayers to our Founder and... God answered! On 8 October last, Fr Antonio Porcellato, SMA Superior General, sent us a message, part of which reads as follows: "Today (8 October 2020) around 10pm in Rome we received the news

of the liberation of our confrere, Fr Pierluigi Maccalli, who was kidnapped in Niger Republic on 17 September, 2018.

**The joy of the whole SMA family is great and our gratitude to the Lord is even greater.**

We rejoice with the Maccalli family, with Fr Walter Maccalli SMA, our confrere and brother of Fr Gigi, and all those who were concerned, prayed and contributed in one way or the other to his freedom".

In concluding his Message, Fr Porcellato asked us to "continue to pray for the other hostages who are still in the hands of the kidnapers. We pray for the numerous victims of this blind violence that is hitting hard the Sahel especially those who were attacked in Burkina Faso recently. May God bless and guide all those who work for peace, justice, and reconciliation."

Fr Gigi arrived in Rome-Ciampino the following day, along with the other Italian hostage, Nicola Chiacchio. After meeting with the Italian Prime Minister and other officials, he completed various formalities.

Fr Porcellato writes, "We were finally able to see him and take him to the SMA Generalate in Rome on Friday evening, together with his sister's family who came to welcome him. In two days everything has changed for him. He has experienced a gamut of emotions over these recent days. **Fr Gigi thanks everyone for their prayers and for all that has been done for his release.** He is physically fine, even though he has lost a lot of weight. He is also well mentally: lucid and more solid than ever in his Christian vocation and commitment to be a missionary. He celebrated the Eucharist with us on Saturday morning: the first after a Eucharistic fast of over two years.

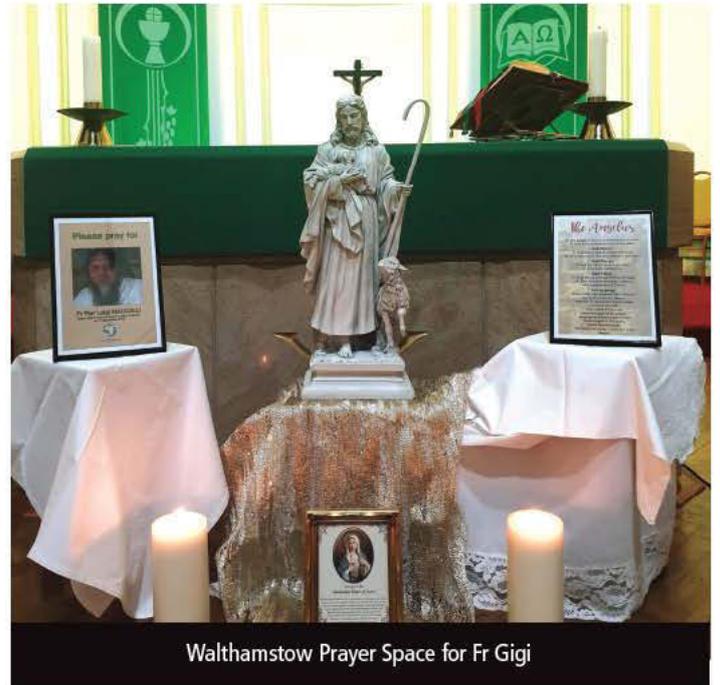
Now he will do the quarantine required by the health authorities in his family home in northern Italy. He will have time to rest, to eat well and to let all these events settle. Later he will be able to visit the SMA communities in Genoa and Padua and resume contact with everyone. We thank the Lord and the many people who have prayed and waited for his return, starting with Pope Francis, the Archdiocese of Niamey, Niger, where he works and Crema diocese, Italy, from where he left as a missionary."

In the Irish Province, a huge network of people prayed for Fr Gigi's release. Our four SMA parishes and SMA Houses displayed his photo in prominent places so that he would be remembered. In our Walthamstow parish, London, they produced prayer cards for people to use when praying for him and others who were unjustly held. People phoned or wrote asking about him. He was carried on a bed of prayer by so many of our supporters since his kidnapping. Thank you so much. Fr Gigi is back with his family we pray that he will now have a good rest and return to full health.

In an interview after his release, Fr Gigi said that he had no access to the Bible but that he prayed the Rosary every morning, afternoon and evening. He was told on the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary (7 October) that he was going to be released and he attributes his release to her and the intercession of the SMA Founder, Venerable Melchior de Marion Brésillac. **"He brought me out"**, Fr Gigi said. God always answers our prayers.

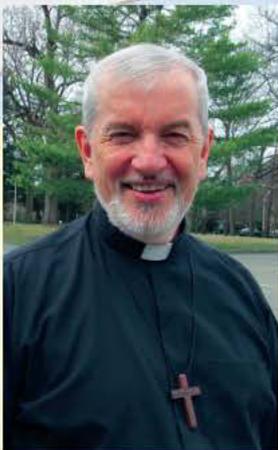
The lesson of this terrible ordeal is that prayer works. Your prayers work!

Again, thank you for all your prayers and, finally, all praise and thanks to almighty God.



Walthamstow Prayer Space for Fr Gigi

## Together Again



Every Sunday at 2pm Irish time I celebrate a Zoom Mass here in Ranelagh, Dublin, for the members of the Ichthus Prayer Community, a group that I was part of when I worked in Philippines over 30 years ago. The members have held together over the years even though many of them are scattered throughout the world. In the early days of the pandemic when many of us were in lockdown, they asked if I would celebrate a webcam Mass for them. I agreed. Today is my twenty first Sunday Mass with the members of this community. It is a real blessing for me to be together again in prayer with this group.

The time seems unusual for a Sunday Mass – 2.00pm. Especially when I have to skip the Sunday lunch with my community! We picked this time to enable the members around the world to tune in. For those in California and Washington State they will be joining the Mass at 6am local time, in Canada it's 7am, in Virginia it's 9am. For those joining us

in Dubai it's 5pm, in Manila it's 9pm, in Tokyo it's 10pm and for those joining us in Australia it's midnight local time!

The host of our Zoom Mass is Rosanna Bradley, a founder member of the Ichthus Prayer Community, originally from Manila and now living in Buncrana, Co Donegal. Our celebration has improved over the 21 weeks and, considering the logistics of a world-wide congregation, works very well. The Chavez family members in Southern California provide the music and lead us in the singing while the readers change from week to week. Rosanna and Mona Montevirten (who is in the SMA Good Shepherd parish in Manila) show Powerpoint images of the Mass readings and the songs so that everyone can join in. A lot of organization goes into the preparations for each Sunday's Mass.

After the Mass we spend a little time greeting each other and catching up on news. Our weekly Mass is without doubt one of the silver linings for all of us in the dark cloud of Coronavirus, and I praise God for making it possible.

Fr Pat Kelly SMA



GSP Church, Manila.

# Fr Gigi's calls for forgiveness and fraternity



Fr Gigi Maccalli spent his first night of freedom at the SMA Generalate in Rome. During his hours there he spoke with the community. Fr Antonio Porcellato, SMA Superior General, shares thoughts on this time.

After two years of silence and solitude, Father Gigi Maccalli SMA needed to feel at home, to feel welcomed and listened to. "He talked for an hour, without ever getting tired", Fr Antonio

Porcellato, SMA Superior General, stated in an interview with FIDES, the News Agency of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples in the Vatican.

"The missionary is the man of the Word, of the announcement. Without a Bible, without the Word of God and the Eucharist, Fr Gigi said he learned to listen to silence: the silence of the great Sahara desert, the inner silence. Like the prophet Isaiah, he could feel the presence of God in silence, in solitude. He found that God always gave him strength."

Fr Antonio recalled, among other things, an episode on October 10, before Fr Gigi and his family began the journey towards Madignano in northern Italy. "Before leaving Rome, Gigi asked to be allowed to stop at the Prima Porta cemetery. There Miriam Dawa is buried, a 13-year-old girl from Niger Republic, who was admitted to Bambino Gesù hospital in Italy for heart treatment. But the disease was more serious than expected and Miriam died and the family buried her in Rome. Fr Gigi prayed at her tomb for a short while".

Of these hours spent with his confrere, just freed from the kidnapers, Fr Antonio will never forget "Gigi's deep faith, despite the doubts. Gigi said that in the desert he felt abandoned, he did not know where his captors took him each time. He had doubts also about the role of the SMA: what are they doing to free me? But he never lost hope, trust, the sense of God's presence that accompanied him everywhere".

"His fellow prisoners had converted to Islam, more out of convenience than out of conviction, to get better treatment. He has always remained calm and convinced in his faith, in his relationship with the Lord".

"I was also struck by his call for forgiveness, fraternity, the hope that we can reach an understanding with the jihadists", continues Fr Antonio. "There are other hostages left in the hands of terrorists. We must have the ideal of fraternity within us, insisted Fr Gigi, and try to resolve our conflicts and our misunderstandings with non-violence".

"These were moments that I will never forget, that will remain forever in my mind", concludes the Superior General. (With thanks to Agenzia Fides, 14/10/20)



In his own interview with FIDES, Fr Gigi spoke of his time in captivity as **"an opportunity to review the film of my life"**.

**"I asked for a Bible but they didn't give it to me. Every Sunday I meditated on a Gospel passage"**. He was unable to celebrate Mass for the duration of his captivity. **"Every day, especially on Sundays, I said the Consecration prayer, 'This is my body, the bread that was broken for the world and especially for Africa'"**.

His kidnapers tried to convert him to Islam, considering him an 'impure' kafir condemned to hell, but he resisted. His only support was the **"simple morning and evening prayers that I had learned from my mother and the rosary that my grandmother had taught me as a contemplative prayer"**. He made a Rosary out of a piece of twine and used it every morning and evening.

He called out to God, **"where are you? Why did you let me down? Until when, Lord? I knew and I know now that He was and is there!"** Later in the interview he said, **"I learned how many people prayed and asked for my release during marches and vigils... that surprised and amazed me"**.

The future? **"These two years have taught me to live in the present. I wanted it to end soon, every sunset I would say 'hopefully tomorrow'".** Then when the sun rose I took my rosary and structured my day with the usual daily gestures, day after day. The future belongs to God, now I am enjoying my return home, this is my present. The future will be the way God wants it".

# A Reflection on the Coronavirus in Lebanon

Act in the spirit of faith in all you do

Lebanon is the most religiously-diverse and the smallest country (10,452km<sup>2</sup>) in the Middle East. It is considered a pioneer in the field of education. At the same time, its national flag indicates – through the cedar tree touching the red stripes in the flag – that conflict is an ever-present reality for the country.

Today, Lebanon is living through a grave (political and economic) crisis. Its natural beauty is being distorted, disfigured and due to massive pollution, is probably irreversible by now. Another problem is that most Lebanese, having lost all hope of a prosperous future because of this corruption, want to leave their homeland for a better life elsewhere. Last August, a massive blast rocked Beirut, flattening much of the city's port, demolishing buildings across the capital and sending a giant mushroom cloud into the sky.

This sudden devastation overwhelmed a country and a nation already struggling and suffocated by both the coronavirus pandemic and a massive recession and unemployment.

The OLA Lebanese Province has six communities: two in the Metn region (Salima and Kornet Chehwan), two in the Beirut region (Al Kafaat-Hadath and Rawda), one in the Beqaa region (Kab-Elias) and one in the east of Sidon (Lebaa). There are 30 Sisters in all, three of whom are from the Nigerian Province. The Sisters are engaged in education, medical, social work and helping in local parishes.

*Nigerian OLA Sister Jovita Onuchi writes about how the OLAs are living with the reality of the Coronavirus.*

**"Covid-19, a virus blowing through the air, is everywhere in the world; many are suffering and people are dying every day. Things are not the way they used to be, bringing everyone face to face with a new reality now. This brings to the fore the words of St Paul, "more than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that our suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Romans 5:3-5).**

Here in Lebanon, there has been much hardship brought about by the lockdown and the economic downturn. Since 12 March 2020, the health system and the economy of our country continues to struggle as a result of the Coronavirus Pandemic. There has been no movement; schools have been closed and there are no Masses celebrated in our parishes. We are indoors, living each day looking with hope to God's intervention.

In our small OLA community we assist at Mass either through TV, Facebook or YouTube. We spend more time at community prayer where we pray for the world and for all those who have died because of the pandemic. For we live with hope, knowing that the suffering of



this present time will not make us lose the vision of the glory that is to be revealed to us.

During this difficult lockdown period, we try to see God in everything we do, bearing in mind the words of our Founder, Fr Augustin Planque, who encouraged us to live out our faith as the foundation of all Christian life, because it rests on the rock of divine truth, **"act in the spirit of faith in all you do"**.

We continue to encourage each other with our daily house chores, cooking, planting, watering our plants and flowers, singing together, exercising our bodies, watching interesting movies, praying and sharing our daily life experiences. Our Sisters working in the schools continue their activities by sending their lessons to the students online. Most importantly, we encourage our beloved ones who are far and near, through our prayers, constant communication and helpful words / reflections through phone calls and social media.

In order to keep safe and healthy, we respect the various instructions of the health ministry by washing our hands regularly and wearing our masks when necessary. We, the OLA Sisters in Lebanon, urge you to do the same and to cast all your anxieties on the Lord, who cares and loves us and in whom our lives find meaning in the midst of life's trials.

**Sr Jovita Onuchi OLA**

# Virgin and Child



Fr Bert Bonouvrie is a Dutch SMA priest working in the parish of St Anne in Agadir, Morocco, for many years. He sent us a copy of an address given by Mr Abdallah Aourik to the parishioners on the occasion of his gifting the church with a sculpture of the Virgin and Child for the support shown to him and other Muslims at the time of the 1960 earthquake there.

14 March 2020

*Good day, Ladies and Gentlemen,  
I am happy to be among you today. I am Abdallah Aourik and I was born in Agadir, formerly Talborj, in Chtouki Street, in 1946. I am one of the survivors of the earthquake of 29 February 1960.*

*It is now 60 years and 14 days since the earthquake destroyed my native village. In the days following (the earthquake), the Red Cross took care of the children who survived. I was among them. I was 14 years old at the time.*

*After being placed in orphanages, we were taken to Belgium where Christian families welcomed us with open arms and took care of us as their own children. Since then, I have not ceased to thank the Belgian families for this kind gesture (like the Good Samaritan) to the Muslim and Jewish children of this village of Agadir.*

*Today I am here to thank the Christian Church, which teaches its faithful to offer charity to everyone, and to donate to the Church of St Anne of Agadir one of my original sculptures in plaster, representing 'The Virgin and Child', dated 1979. There's a bronze copy of this statue in Belgium which is placed in the Church of the (Belgian) village where I spent my childhood years*

*I hope this little statue will find a place among the faithful of this parish of St Anne.*

# ISLAMIC CALENDAR and RENEWAL

As we Irish travel and read more as well as hearing and seeing world news, we notice that the world of the Middle East, Africa and South East Asia is in a security turmoil. At the core of many of these countries we find the religion of Islam. The Islamic religion is in a period of change. Some Muslims want to return to the practice of their religion during the early days of Islam when the Prophet Muhammed was alive (died in 632 AD). Others want to modernize the practice of their religion to be more in line with trends and realities of our modern world.

In the Islamic world the end of each century has always been seen as a time of renewal. Some scholars see it as the time for the arrival of either the Mahdi (Messiah) or of a great reformer of Islam. The majority of Muslim believers belong to Sunni Islam. Most of them believe that this Messiah is actually the Prophet 'Isa or Jesus who will return to earth to restore the purity of Islam. This will herald a millennium of peace on earth before the Last Day of Judgement.

1979 in our calendar was the beginning of the Islamic 14th century. Their calendar follows the moon and not the sun. Therefore the Islamic year is about 11 days less than ours. This year of 2020 AD is c.1441 AH in the Islamic calendar. The start of their calendar begins in 622 AD. This is the year in which the Prophet Muhammed began what is known as the Hejira or migration from Mecca to Yathrib, later known as Medina. Two very important events happened in the Islamic world in 1979 (1400 AH).

Firstly, the Shah of Iran was overthrown by the followers of Ayatollah Khomeini who then returned from exile on 1 February 1979. Although this was a Shi'ia regime (their members do not belong to the majority Sunni) it had major physiological repercussions on the outlook of the world Islamic community.

The second traumatic event was in Mecca, the holiest shrine / city of

Islam. In Mecca we have the Ka'bah which is seen as the Bayt Allah or House of God. It is the place of pilgrimage for millions of Muslims each year. In November 1979 the Grand Mosque in Mecca, which surrounds the Ka'bah, was seized by an armed group who proclaimed their leader as the Mahdi or Messiah.

As this year (1979), at the beginning of a new Islamic century, was a time of expectation within the Muslim community of the arrival of some great reformer or even the Messiah, he gained some followers. They maintained their armed presence in the Grand Mosque for around 2 weeks. This self-proclaimed Mahdi and his followers were killed but expectations within the community were not quelled.

These events had raised hopes among Muslims for a revival of both the religion of Islam and the rise of the power of the Islamic world. Scholars drew crowds to themselves and preached new ideas which invigorated Islam. The group known as the Muslim Brotherhood (founded in Egypt in 1928) renewed their efforts at reform in many Middle Eastern countries. Other groups sprang up encouraging Muslims to change, follow their religion more fervently and change their lives.

In previous eras when the Islamic century ended revivals occurred. However, within a generation their exuberance waned and often disappeared. The end of the 1300s and the start of 1400 AH was a time of reforming upheaval. Religious preachers gained many followers via TV and print. The internet gave them an extra impetus towards spreading their ideas, however mild or radical they became. From these movements arose zealous groups like Isil who brought such destruction and death to so many Islamic communities in the Middle East. This zealous fervour has spread to North and sub-Saharan Africa as well, either under the guise of religious or political reform.

Jarlath Walsh SMA



# The Role of the Laity in the Church of northern Nigeria

Bishop Tim Carroll (Millstreet, Co Cork) was ordained an SMA in 1965 and was a missionary in Nigeria for over 44 years. During that time he was noted for his work in the Borgu area of Niger State. His mission work was built on the solid foundation of catechists. These women and men were to be found in every village of his parishes; some trained by Fr Tim during the annual Dry Season Literacy programmes and others he sent to the Malumfashi Catechists Training Centre, which was run by Fr Michael McGrath SMA.

In 1995 he was appointed Prefect Apostolic of Kontagora, Nigeria with the aim of building up the local church in order for it to become a diocese in its own right. From 2002, Bishop Tim was the Vicar Apostolic until he handed over to Bishop Bulus Dauwa Yohanna. Last April, Kontagora was made a diocese with Bishop Bulus at its head. The Lord has blessed the efforts of all the missionaries but, more especially, the faith and work of the People of God in Kontagora.

The role of early missionaries in the evangelisation of Africa is well documented. Today, I want to share some thoughts on the role played by ordinary men and women in this story.

The early missionaries often get the credit for carrying the Gospel to "mission lands", but this is only half the story. The local people, who invited them to their villages, and who, often literally, carried them on their shoulders across swollen rivers, and who lived out the Gospel message day after day, are often forgotten.

To write the history of the church in Nigeria, or in Africa in general, and to omit the indispensable role played by these local women and men, would be an injustice to the memory of these heroic early Christians. It would be an incomplete history, and a one-sided account.

I know of many thriving Catholic communities in Nigeria today, that received the faith in the past, not from expatriate missionaries, but from local catechists and other lay women and men, who met the faith elsewhere, and brought the Good News home to the people of their own villages, and to neighbouring communities.

Today the work of evangelisation still goes on. And, as in the early days, the local men and women are still the foundations on which any local church is built. They remain the right hand and the left hand of the local church.

I know parishes in Northern Nigeria with well over 70 Catholic communities, with just one priest to care for them. Most of these communities are scattered across vast distances of the open savannah. It would be impossible for a single priest to visit all of these on a regular basis. Many of these villages are inaccessible to the priest during the Wet Season.

In all of these villages, there are self-sufficient Catholic communities, thriving without the presence of a priest. They may get Mass once or twice a year, when the priest visits.

For the rest of the year they organise and hold their own liturgy, based on the Sunday readings. These are Catholic communities, thriving on "a liturgy without a priest".

You may say, that they don't receive the Eucharist every Sunday. True, but frequent Communion is a relatively recent phenomenon, introduced by St. Pius X, in 1905, only 115 years ago.

It's icing on the cake. The bread of God's word is still broken and shared by a people, hungry for God, cake without the icing.

Each community elects its own "Shugaba", or male leader, and his assistant. The women also elect their own leader, with her assistant. All posts are held for a specific period, then new elections are held.

They also have a "Leader of Prayer", responsible for the Sunday liturgy, and a "Leader of Song", or choir leader. As all Africans love singing, the choir plays a very important role in the liturgy. As the choir leads, the whole church joins in. The liturgy and singing are done in their own language, accompanied with drumming. On big occasions like Harvest Thanksgiving, the drumming is accompanied with dancing.



Bishop Tim Carroll with his successor, Bishop Bulus Yohanna.

The strongest Catholic lay organisation in all of Northern Nigeria is a group called "Zumuntar Mata", a Catholic women's organisation. It exists at community, parish, diocesan, and ecclesiastical provincial level. They elect their own leaders and vice leaders. They meet regularly. Talks are given, e.g. by nurses in the group to mothers on food nutrition, baby care, on illness prevention, and so on. Courses on adult literacy for women are also organised. Visitation of the sick is also carried out. This excellent organisation caters for the spiritual, physical, and mental health of women. It's also a great form of social relaxation and camaraderie for women who meet together, and a welcome break from the hardships of daily life. Their motto: "Educate a mother, and you educate a whole family."

The men have a similar organisation, "Zumuntar Maza", but it is often not as strong, or as far reaching, as the women's group.

All these organisations are run on a voluntary basis, and are a shining example of what a strong vibrant Catholic laity can do in the Church.

**These people are the Church, and take their responsibilities seriously.** Our laity in Ireland, if given the opportunity, would also follow the example of these ordinary women and men in Africa, who as we speak, are carrying the African Church on their shoulders into the changing world of tomorrow.

In Ireland, our Sunday Mass and Eucharist is totally dependent on a form of priesthood that will soon be extinct, if present trends continue, we urgently need an alternative form of worship, that will feed a people hungry for God.

The Church in Ireland would do well to follow the example of Nigeria and Africa, where a vibrant Sunday liturgy is thriving, a liturgy where ordinary men and women have been taking responsibility for years.

**Tim Carroll SMA**



**I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith (2 Tim 4:7)**

Please pray for our deceased supporters and our OLA and SMA missionaries.

**Fr John Quinlan** (Tralee, Co Kerry) served in Nigeria and Ireland, died on 16 July 2020, aged 83 years.

Lord God, welcome our deceased supporters, benefactors and missionaries into the peace of your Kingdom. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

## Mass via Webcam

During these Covid times many parishes are using Webcam to allow people to 'attend' daily / Sunday Mass.

Join us for 10am Mass (Blackrock Road and Wilton), 5.35pm (Wilton) or Walthamstow (check site for Mass times)

Go to [www.sma.ie](http://www.sma.ie) and scroll down the page to Parish Webcams and click on the church of your choice.



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You may send money, at no additional cost, for our Missionary Work, Family Vocations Community (FVC), MissionAssociation Cards etc. using our **Donate Online** facility on the [www.sma.ie](http://www.sma.ie) homepage.

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