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THREE GIFTS FROM MY CAPTIVITY



On the night of 17 September 2018, Fr Gigi Maccalli SMA (Italian Province) was kidnapped from his Mission in Bomoanga, Niger Republic, by GSIM jihadists (Group of Support for Islam and Muslims). He was dressed in his pyjamas and slippers. He was released in Mali Republic on 8 October 2020. Since his release, Fr Gigi has taken time to rest, to pray and to recover his health, having spent nearly all of his captivity in chains. He spent some weeks with our SMA community in Wilton, Cork, last August, to improve his English. During that time, he spoke of his 'trial' at the Sunday Masses in the parish.

After thanking the SMA and our supporters in Ireland for our prayers, he continued:

"I may summarise this long time as a prisoner, in two words: sadness and bitterness. This time has been for me the period, by far, the darkest of my life. From September 2018 to October 2020, I have counted 753 days in captivity, otherwise 25 new moons that means two years and three weeks, a long holiday! But I have to add, right now, that since the first day of freedom, I have washed away these two years of sadness and bitterness.

At my arrival in Rome, my nephew Andrea hugged me so strongly in his arms that I poured out all my tears. So these tears have cleansed (baptised) me... I'm reborn, and now I feel at peace.

The strength came from above, I am convinced. I cried, prayed and invoked the Virgin Mary and the Holy Spirit."

I summarise my story using three objects that I brought home from my captivity. They are the gifts of my desert experience: chain, rosary and this Cross.

Chain: this is a piece of the chain that I had on my feet. This link is the only part that I was able to open because it was not welded. After 17 days on a motorbike, a man came with a chain (1.5 metres long), and put one end of the chain around my ankle and the other end round a tree. I remember it well, it was on 5 October 2018. For 22 days I was held there, day and night.



Father Pier Luigi Maccalli during his captivity



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With Pope Francis and Fr Antonio Porcellato SMA Superior General

I cried out all my pain to God. "Why have you forsaken me? What wrong have I done? Where are you God? Lord come haste to my aid..."

After that I was taken away into the Sahara. For a whole year the Sahara was my open-air prison. For the first 6 months I was the only prisoner there, then I was joined by two other hostages, Luca (Tacchetto) and Nicola (Chiacchio). The guards took off the chain, but then, on 14 September 2019, they put it on my feet again. This happened because Luca tried to escape during the night. From then on, I was in chains each night from sunset to sunrise until my release. Sleeping in chains was very very uncomfortable.

Even though it might sound strange to you, I tell you that being chained has opened up 'my free inner space'. One evening I was upset, looking down at my feet in chains. Then suddenly an inner awareness came to me and I said to myself "my feet are chained, but my heart is not!". I thought of St Thérèse of Lisieux, the Little Flower, who said: "I will be love in the heart of the church". I recalled what our Founder said: "I will be a missionary from the bottom of my heart." So the prayer of the heart was my free space.

This piece of chain reminds me of all those who are suffering as victims of war and injustice and the urgent need for mission for peace.

Rosary: I made this Rosary myself from the material used to protect me from the sun. I tied 10 knots, so I could say the Rosary

twice a day. Even now, I use it to pray for all the innocent victims of the war (every morning that is my first intention). I continue to pray this Rosary (one decade) that I wear also on my wrist for all the innocent victims of war and also for those who persecute the peace.

These 10 knots remind me that the important thing in life is.... to tie RELATIONSHIPS, to build bonds of friendship / fraternity. As Pope Francis says in his Encyclical Letter *Tutti Fratelli*, we are all brothers and sisters.

These same words I said to Abu Naser (one of the mujahidin's leaders) on my last day in captivity: "... may God help us to understand that we are all brothers and sisters!" Before leaving the desert, I forgave him.

In spite of the words they spoke against me (they looked on me as kafir and an enemy, good only for hell), but I am convinced that only forgiveness and pardon can break down the chains of hate and violence.

Finally, the 3rd Gift is the Cross: I made this cross by myself but I didn't show it to anyone. I've always hidden it in my pocket. This cross reminds me of the silence.

It was 2 years of great silence, sadness and isolation. My greatest sadness as a missionary with 21 years of presence in Africa (10 in Côte d'Ivoire and 11 in Niger) was to see young people (my jailers and supervisors) indoctrinated by propaganda videos praising Jihad and violence.."



The silence is the greatest gift I've brought back from the desert. I cried out as Jesus did on the cross: "Father, why have you forsaken me?" And God didn't seem to answer (or better) he answered me with the sound of silence. But that heavy silence allowed me to go deeper into myself and see beyond my own horizon. I discovered in this silence something about God. Today I dare to say, God is silence.

I have experienced that the desert is not empty, but the best place to hear God deeper. The word of God comes from the silence. The silence is the father of God's word. God is light in the darkness and he speaks and communicates thorough the silence.

Along with the appeals of Archbishop Lompo of Niamey and the Catholic community in Niger, two young Protestant pastors organized a vigil of ecumenical prayer and the Muslim leaders of Niger joined the Christians in praying for Fr Gigi's release, asking his kidnappers that, following the true teaching of Islam, they stop all violence and respect the rights of every person.

Since his release, Fr Gigi has written a book *Catene de libertà* (Chains of freedom). It has been translated into English and will be published soon.

The **keyword / symbol** of my desert experience is the cross, and from the cross I've learned two lessons: **first, I learned to pray differently**. I like what St. John of the Cross has said about prayer: "prayer is the harmony of two silences".

And the second lesson, I brought home from my story is...to love and forgive my enemies. During my captivity, I often meditated on the words of Jesus on the cross: Father, forgiven them, they don't know what they are doing. whBefore leaving the desert for freedom, I forgave my captors. For all the details of my story, I refer you to *Catene de libertà*, the book I have written on my time in captivity. But at least these three objects highlight the main elements of my desert story.

Last but not least... I'm set free, **but peace is still a hostage**... so, please let us continue to pray for peace. Don't stop praying for all those who suffer for the sake of the Gospel. Thank you.

Exactly six years after his kidnapping, on 17 September 2024 – Fr Gigi returned to Niger to visit his mission and attend the priestly ordination of two sons of Bomoanga. He is now appointed to the SMA International Formation Centre in Benin Republic. Speaking of his return to Niger, Fr Gigi said: "My arrival in Niamey, on the evening of September 17, 2024, was preceded by heavy rain and tears that I could only hold back with difficulty..."

Attending the ordination and the first Mass of Michel Wuoba and Felix Waali (assisted by Deacon Michel Ouliga, also from the Bomoanga parish) was for me the fulfilment of a dream.

I ended my homily by recalling that at the inauguration of the new church in Bomoanga (January 2017) I had prophesied that the day I would see a young man from Bomoanga celebrating at the altar, I would say (like old Simeon in the temple): "Now let your servant go in peace, Lord". This word came true and far exceeded my expectations, because my eyes saw not one but three young men at the altar of Niamey Cathedral, ready to serve the Gospel."



With his brother Fr Walter SMA (on left)

CELEBRATING 140 YEARS OF CATHOLICISM IN GHANA



Ghana celebration group with Bishop Joseph Osei-Bonsu

Fr Auguste Moreau SMA and Fr Eugene Murat arrived in the Gold Coast (modern day Ghana) in 1880. Two years later, Fr Moreau travelled to the Asante (Ashanti) Region of the country. The SMA celebrated the 140th anniversary of that visit to the Manhyia Palace, where he sought permission of the Asantehene, the Monarch of the Asante Kingdom, to establish the Catholic Church in Ashanti. From that were laid the foundations for the vibrant Catholic Church that exists in Ghana today. Fr Dominic Wabwireh SMA recalls some of the events which took place during this year of celebration.

A number of events and initiatives highlighted the rich history and ongoing commitment of the SMA to preaching the Good News of Jesus Christ and to improving the lives of God's people in Ghana. A two-day conference was held in collaboration with the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) in Kumasi.

Scholars and experts came together to explore the cultural and historical impact of Catholicism in Ashanti, fostering intellectual dialogue and understanding.

An unforgettable pilgrimage, retracing the path Fr Moreau took from Elmina to Kumasi, passing through Assin Fosu, helped us to experience first-hand the challenges and triumphs faced by early missionaries as they brought the message of Catholicism to the region.

A solemn Thanksgiving Mass on 25 June, 2023, at St. Paul Parish in Adukrom, Kumasi, brought the celebrations to a close. During it, Most Rev Joseph Osei-Bonsu, Bishop of Konongo-Mampong, ordained the 33rd Ghanaian SMA priest, Fr Samuel Hagan. In his homily, Bishop Osei-Bonsu praised the SMA for their pioneering work and offered guidance to Fr Hagan as he embarked on his pastoral journey.

Fr Dennis Senyo Etti, SMA, the Vice-Provincial of the SMA in Ghana, reflected on the mission's humble beginnings in Kumasi and paid tribute to the founding



Newly-ordained Fr Samuel Hagan

SMA IN ASHANTI

missionaries. Expressing deep gratitude for their unwavering commitment and sacrifice, Fr Etti highlighted the immense risks taken by European missionaries who left behind comfortable lives to serve in Ghana. Their dedication and missionary zeal paved the way for the establishment of the SMA and the subsequent growth of six dioceses in Ghana. Today there are 19 dioceses.

Fr Etti also expressed heartfelt appreciation to the people of the Asante State (Ashanti Region) for their unwavering support and acceptance of the Catholic faith since its introduction in 1882. The SMA has formed a deep bond with the community, and Fr Etti acknowledged the generosity of successive Ashanti kings in ensuring the firm establishment of the SMA and the Catholic Church in Ashanti.

Looking towards the future, Fr Etti emphasized that the mission of the SMA continues even after 140 years. As a testament to their ongoing commitment, the SMA initiated a special project to mark their presence in Ashanti: the construction of a medical clinic, in Akokoamong, on the outskirts of Kumasi. The clinic provides essential healthcare services to the community, aligning with the SMA's ethos of compassion and service.

Fr Etti thanked the chiefs and people of Akokoamong for generously offering the land for the clinic. However, he also called for support from the wider community, urging both material contributions and prayers to ensure the successful construction and operation of the clinic.

Since the time of Fr Moureau and Fr Murat, many SMA's missionaries from Holland, France and Ireland have preached the Gospel in Ghana. **Today, that work continues with 35 Ghanaian SMA priests, 27 of whom are on mission in other African countries and beyond.** Twenty-eight SMAs are on mission in Ghana, coming from eight African countries as well as India, Philippines and the Netherlands.

As we celebrate our remarkable history and look with confidence to the future, we continue to leave an indelible mark on the lives of countless individuals, embodying the spirit of service and devotion that has defined the SMA since its foundation in 1856.

ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST PARISH CELEBRATES



Confirmation group with the Bishop and SMA Priests

June 2024 was a month of celebrations for St John the Baptist parish, Buedu, Sierra Leone. This, the first SMA parish in Kenema diocese, has three SMA priests caring for the Parish Church and several outstation villages, stretching about 40 miles into the interior, heading towards the Liberian border.

On 22nd June, during the visit of our bishop, Most Rev Henry Aruna, thirteen couples were married and, on the 23rd, Bishop Aruna confirmed 33 youths and adults (see the August photo in the 2025 SMA/VOLA Calendar). The Feast of St John the Baptist – our parish patron – was on the 24th and, on the following day, we celebrated the 165th anniversary of the death of our Founder, the Venerable Bishop Melchior de Marion Brésillac.

He arrived in Freetown, Sierra Leone, on the 14th of May 1859; six weeks later – 25th June – he died of Yellow Fever. After some years working in the country, the SMA moved to other countries on the West Coast of Africa. But we never forgot our roots. Up to the 1960's, SMA missionaries travelled by ship to West Africa, always stopping off in Freetown to pray at the grave of the Founder and his companions. Twelve years ago, the SMA returned to its roots in the Archdiocese of Freetown, Sierra Leone. I came in 2014.

We began this parish four years ago, in 2020. Next year, we hope to open a parish in the Diocese of Bo. As of September 2024, there are six SMA priests working in the country – they come from India, Nigeria, Zambia.



Offertory Procession

A LIFE-CHANGING VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE IN BUGISI, TANZANIA

Earlier this year, Marese O'Connell and Karen Costigan set off on a journey that, in their own words, was nothing short of life-changing. They found their three weeks volunteering with the OLA Sisters in Bugisi, Tanzania, a blend of adventure, heartfelt connection, and deep cultural immersion. Friends hailing from County Tipperary, Marese and Karen have shared their touching experiences with us, bringing to life their time in Bugisi.

Sr Kathleen Costigan OLA (Tipperary) and Sr Cassie Hurley OLA (Cork) welcomed them at Mwanza airport, enveloping them in warmth and hospitality. After tea and toast in the OLA Convent they set off on their 4-hour journey to Bugisi. On the way, they listened to many stories from the Sisters, quickly feeling at home.

In Bugisi, their days were packed with lots of work and joyful interactions: painting the playground, working in the health centre, and engaging with the local Kisukuma people. Juma, the local supervisor, guided them through their tasks, allowing them to leave a lasting mark on the playground with their artwork. This simple act of painting became a beautiful way to bond with the local people and create lasting memories.

Mornings started with Walter's delicious breakfasts, which became a highlight of their day. Fresh fruit, mandazi, chapati, and eggs fuelled their work and fostered a sense of routine and comfort. Walter's culinary skills, particularly his chips mayai, became a cherished memory for both volunteers. The daily ritual of breakfast not only provided sustenance but also became a time of reflection and connection, strengthening their bond and preparing them for the day's work.

The impact of their fundraising efforts, which raised over €10,000, was immediately visible. Marese and Karen witnessed first-hand how their contributions supported our Health Centre, Primary School, and Vocational Training Centre in Bugisi. They met individuals like Amisi, who needed urgent medical treatment, and Carolina, a young girl caring for her family while pursuing a hairdressing course at the Training Centre. Their efforts enabled five teenagers to attend the centre for a year, offering them hope and new opportunities. The tangible results of their fundraising highlighted the importance of their mission and reinforced their commitment to making a difference.

One particularly poignant moment for Karen was during a distribution of beans, sugar, and maize. She was moved by the sight of a man using his shirt as a makeshift bag and the resilience of the women carrying heavy loads on their heads. These encounters underscored the daily challenges faced by the local community and the importance of their support. The raw, unfiltered glimpses into the lives of the locals left a lasting impression on her, deepening her understanding of the community's needs and resilience.

Marese and Karen embraced the local culture wholeheartedly. They participated in our morning prayers, attended vibrant Easter ceremonies, and even played in a football match against the health centre staff. These experiences were filled with laughter, learning, and a deep sense of community. The match, in particular, was a highlight,

with Sr Kathleen, a former county finalist in Camross, leading their team to victory. The spirit of camaraderie and the joy of shared experiences strengthened their connection with the people of Bugisi.

Their stay also included moments of adaptation and humility. From mastering the art of washing with a bucket to coexisting with a resident lizard named Lizzie, Marese and Karen quickly adapted to their new environment. These small challenges only deepened their appreciation for the comforts they often took for granted back home. The daily routines and small victories of adapting to a new way of life added a layer of authenticity to their experience, making it all the more enriching.

Both Marese and Karen left Bugisi with a profound sense of gratitude and a wealth of memories. The friendships they forged, the lives they touched, and the lessons they learned have left an indelible mark on their hearts. The unwavering dedication and kindness of our Sisters made their trip truly special. The hospitality, coupled with the tireless work for the community, provided a nurturing environment for the volunteers to thrive and contribute meaningfully.

As Marese reflected, "I really do hope to go back someday, and if that happens, I promise everyone I will have a bit more Swahili up my sleeve!" Similarly, Karen expressed a desire to return, hoping to continue the work they started and reconnect with the community that welcomed them so warmly. Their shared hope of returning underscores the lasting impact of their experience and their commitment to our OLA mission.

In sharing their stories, Marese and Karen highlight the transformative power of volunteering. Their journey to Tanzania was not just about giving but also receiving – inspiration, friendship, and a deeper understanding of the world. Their experience stands as a testament to the extraordinary impact that can be made when individuals come together to support and uplift one another. The memories they created, the people they met, and the work they did will continue to inspire them and others long after their return to Ireland.

Michelle Robertson - OLA Communications



Sr Kathleen OLA (front, 2nd from left) with victorious team

SMA Dallas



Opening Mass 24-25 Kabwe

From the beginning, our Founder envisioned a missionary family totally devoted to the service of Africa. In a spirit of shared responsibility, we have been called together as members of one community. Therefore, with this aim of living together in a community, the initial formation programme has been set in a way possible to form seminarians who look towards the vision laid by our Founder Bishop Melchior de Marion Brésillac.

The Fr Bernard Weiggers Formation House in Kabwe, Dallas, is where our SMA Zambian seminarians live while studying Philosophy at the nearby St. Augustine's Major Seminary, Mpima. During their two-year programme, our seminarians concentrate on four aspects of their formation: Spiritual, Human, Academic and Pastoral.

Spiritual: we have a number of spiritual exercises every day: Mass, Morning, Midday and Evening Prayer, Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, Lectio Divina and devotions to Our Lady (Rosary, Divine Mercy, Angelus). Every Friday we organize a creative prayer session to help develop our relationship with Christ. Each seminarian – and formator – has a Spiritual director (priests or Sister) to meet regularly to help them develop their spiritual dimension.

Human development: We are called to live together in a community. This challenges each of us to see ourselves as part of a larger group and not live 'on one's own and in one's own way'. We try to achieve a community spirit through sports and manual work. This helps us work together as a team. There are also 'social gatherings' with our formators to develop our relationship beyond the formal class situation.

Academic studies help to develop us intellectually, introduce us to critical thinking and to learn the basics of the Spiritual life as well as Philosophy which is part and parcel of a priest's training. Later, after our International Spiritual Year programme in Benin Republic and a Stage (pastoral year) we will return to the fulltime study of theology. Due to the distance between the seminary and our formation house, we cycle to the seminary every day. This has become part of our life at the formation house and is a good for developing our health.

Last is the pastoral life in the house: Every Saturday and Sunday we go to different parishes and hospices where we do pastoral work. This pastoral experience is central to our formation as it opens us up to the different possibilities which we may face as SMA priests in the future.



Fr Emmanuel Taiwo (Dominican), Fr Fachtna and Fr Benoit

Our Formation House relies on the support of the wider SMA family – particularly members of the Family Vocations Community (FVC) in Ireland to provide for our physical needs (e.g. the fees we must pay to the Mpima Major seminary, living expenses, food, etc.) as well as their prayers. We are grateful to all for this support.

There are eight seminarians in 2024/2025 – five in 1st Phil and three in 2nd Phil. The Superior is Fr Benoit SMA (from Togo) and Fr Fachtna O'Driscoll (from Rathcormac, Co Cork).

Edited from an article written by
Bernard Chola (SMA seminarian in Kabwe).

FIRST ANGOLAN ORDAINED FOR THE SMA

Sebastião Moniz became a permanent member of the SMA earlier this year and was ordained Deacon in our Formation House in Nairobi, Kenya. He is the first Angolan permanent member of our Society.

Twenty-five years ago, Italian SMA priests began working in Angola, encouraging young men to become priests for the Diocese of Caxito, on the outskirts of the capital, Luanda. Ten years ago, the SMA decided to accept Angolans into our Society so that they could live out the command of Jesus to "go out to the whole world; proclaim the Good News to all creation." (Mark 16:16)

After his priestly Ordination in 2025, Rev Sebastião will go on mission to another African country.

At present there are 19 Angolan seminarians at different stages of their formation – Preparatory Programme, Philosophy studies, International Spiritual Year in Calavi, Benin Republic, Pastoral Year (Stage) and Theology.

They are studying alongside SMA seminarians from 15 African countries.

During 2024, the Society ordained 26 priests – from Benin Republic, Central African Republic, DR Congo, Ghana, India, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Nigeria, Togo and Zambia.



**Here is a trustworthy saying:
If we died with him, we will also
live with him (Phil 1:21)**

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

Fr Paddy Connolly (Drimnagh, Dublin), served in Nigeria, Egypt, Kenya and England, died on 15 May, aged 80 years.

Fr Tom Harlow SMA (Kilteevan, Co Roscommon) served in Liberia, Nigeria and Ireland, died on 15 May 2024, aged 84 years.

Fr Fionnbarra Ó Cuilleánáin (Ballinlough, Cork City) served in Nigeria, Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi, died on 26 May 2024, aged 83 years.

Fr Peter Thompson (Scramogue, Strokestown, Co Roscommon), served in Nigeria and Ireland, died on 9 July 2024, aged 88 years.

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

Through Christ our Lord. Amen.



**INTERESTED IN A LIFE
AS AN SMA MISSIONARY?
...IN AFRICA?**

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