News



Marianite Sr. Suellen Tennyson, who is now safe in the United States after being held captive in Burkina Faso for nearly five months, is pictured Sept. 13 during an interview with the Clarion Herald, New Orleans' archdiocesan newspaper. (CNS/Clarion Herald/Peter Finney Jr.)



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During nearly five months of captivity in Burkina Faso, Marianite Sr. Suellen Tennyson wondered aloud where God was hiding in the midst of her isolation and loneliness.

Then, in an instant, she looked down at her feet, where one of her toenails had been battered and bloodied during a harrowing post-kidnapping motorcycle ride deep into the forests of West Africa, after which she was turned over to a rival Muslim group.

Her new captor saw her gouged toe and, inexplicably, began washing her feet.

"I'm sitting there, and this Muslim man is washing my feet. And I said, 'God, is something going on here?' It was like God was using him in some kind of way. I was just taken aback," Tennyson said in a Sept. 13 interview with the Clarion Herald, newspaper of the Archdiocese of New Orleans.

Tennyson, 83, was abducted by a group of armed men the night of April 4-5 from the medical mission residence in Yalgo she had shared since 2013 with two other Marianite sisters and lay employees.

Through Tennyson's ordeal, the Marianites of Holy Cross, of which she is the former international leader, heard nothing about her whereabouts. She was freed peacefully in late August in neighboring Niger into the custody of the FBI and U.S. Embassy and Air Force personnel.

No ransom was paid, Tennyson said, another one of the inscrutable mysteries of her harrowing experience.

Speaking from a safe haven in New Orleans where she returned quietly Aug. 31, Tennyson expressed gratitude that her life was spared and for the invisible actions of the uncounted people who prayed and worked for her release.

"That's what I want to say, 'Thank you to all these people,' " Tennyson said. "I am truly humbled by all of this. And the only way I can say thank you is 'thank you.' "

The Muslim kidnappers who first grabbed Tennyson from her bed blindfolded and gagged her to keep her from yelling out to the other house residents. Her shoes, glasses and medication were left behind.

"I thought maybe they were going to leave me sitting on the porch, but all of a sudden they wrapped me up and took me," Tennyson said.

"Whoa, this was not what I thought was going to happen. But from the beginning, I was asking God to please use this for good. I don't understand why it's happening; I don't understand why they took me. And a lot of good has happened — all these people praying."

She was placed on the back of a motorcycle and told to hang on. Her captors rode through the night and for most of the early morning until she was handed over to a second group, which treated her reasonably well and did not physically harm her.

At one point, she was given a few pieces of paper and a red pen, which she used to mark her days in captivity on a handmade calendar. Throughout her ordeal, she had no idea where she was.

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Before the rainy season came in June, she slept outside under a hand-crafted, tentlike structure with branches and leaves for the roof and a cloth that could be moved to keep the sun out of her eyes. Without books to read, she recited prayers she has known since childhood and Bible verses.

"Prayer sustained me," she said. "I went through my Mass every day. I did each part of the Mass and received spiritual Communion. ... That was the thing that kept me

going because I had nothing."

Yalgo is in northern Burkina Faso near Mali. Reliefweb reported in April that in the past two years, Burkina Faso's northern and eastern regions had seen a "sharp deterioration in the security situation ... due to the presence of non-state armed groups."

Tennyson said she contracted malaria and lost 20 pounds during her captivity. Her diet consisted of "spaghetti, rice, sardines; spaghetti, rice, sardines, but no Italian sauce or good Creole sauce. No red beans and rice."

"I have no desire for sardines anymore," she said.

During her loneliest moments, Tennyson prayed for "peaceful patience" because she saw no end in sight.

"I had many conversations with God," she said. "I would say, 'OK, God, what's your word to me today at this moment?' Sometimes it was a Scripture passage or a story from Scripture. But, after a while, it was just messages to me. And the one that stayed with me the longest was 'peaceful patience. You need to be peacefully patient.' "

Eventually, her captor found a sofa for her so she did not have to sleep on the floor.

In August, without warning, she was moved again on another motorcycle ride. By the end, she was so tired that she begged for a rest because she was barely able to hang on.

Finally, at a rest stop, she saw three men dressed in African garb along with another man dressed in a nice shirt and pants.

"I was thinking, 'Oh, Jesus, is this another group I'm going to have to start up all over again with?' " she said. "But the good news is they had a truck and not a motorcycle. One of the men came to me and said, 'You can take that jacket off.' And he turned to me, and he said, 'You're free!' I said, 'What? I'm free? Who are you?' "

They were now in neighboring Niger. The men took her to a house.

"We stopped to get something to eat, and the man said, 'You need to take a shower. Let the woman of the house help you,' " Tennyson said. "Oh, I felt like I was in

heaven. And then it dawned on me. That was the first woman I had seen in five months."

Back in New Orleans, Tennyson underwent medical checkups. She is regaining her strength and using a walker to guard against falls, but she is getting stronger.

"I sang 'Amazing Grace' I can't tell you how many times," she said. "And I would just add the verse and put how many days I had been in captivity. But I still have just one day to praise the Lord — today."