News
Q&As



Sr. Sylvia Ngozi Ndubuaku of the Medical Missionaries of Mary in June 2021 (Ekpali Saint)



by Ekpali Saint

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On Oct. 25, 2018, Sr. Sylvia Ngozi Ndubuaku and 14 other nuns were returning to Benin City in southern Nigeria after attending a funeral of a sister's relative in one of the country's eastern states when hoodlums attacked their vehicle, shot two nuns in the leg, and abducted four nuns in southern Delta State.

"It was a horrible experience," said Ndubuaku, 60, who was among the four nuns taken away to an unknown destination. "The two sisters sitting in front were shot in their legs. Four of us were kidnapped by young Fulani boys with AK-47s. We were beaten but, thank God, none of us was raped or killed."

She added: "We spent three days and two nights in the bush, moving from one forest to another barefoot, walking in the dark, lying on wet ground and eating nothing — no food, no water, no sleep, but walking and being beaten. The rain beat us twice, and the forest was very cold."

Kidnappings by criminal gangs are frequent in Nigeria, but in recent years, Catholic sisters and priests are soft targets for ransom. Recently, in August this year, gunmen abducted four sisters going for a thanksgiving Mass of another nun in Imo state.

"It is terrible," Ndubuaku told Global Sisters Report.

Ndubuaku joined the Medical Missionaries of Mary in 1985 and was professed in 1987. The desire to help and uplift people facing various struggles inspired her to become a religious.



Sr. Sylvia Ndubuaku draws a blood sample from a patient for a free test at the Family Life Centre in Mbribit Itam in Akwa Ibom state, Nigeria, in 2020. (Kelechukwu Iruoma)

But this is not without its challenges, given the frequent troubles that nuns face in Nigeria, including attacks and abductions.

"Religious life has been very challenging and full of sacrifices. Sometimes you go out there hungry to feed another person. When you are sick, you struggle to help others get better," said Ndubuaku, who is the congregation's leader in West Africa. "All I can say is that religious life for me is full of sacrifices, pain and crosses but with great hope, joy and happiness."

In an interview with GSR, Ndubuaku shared her abduction experience and explained how frequent attacks on and abduction of nuns in Nigeria affect their works and ministries.

***GSR*: How did your abduction affect your ministry and religious life?**

Ndubuaku: The abduction left me with a great deal of fear and vulnerability. The help received through my congregation freed me, but I am still left with the thought, "How can I help these unfortunate young men?"

The security situation hasn't improved in the country since your abduction. Rather, the attack and abduction of nuns in Nigeria have increased. Why are there targeted attacks against sisters in Nigeria?

It is more worrisome now that the kidnapping and killing have increased terribly. It is very frightening. Sisters have even been kidnapped in their convent.

One wonders why these attacks. Sisters are poor workers that have no personal accounts or property except what they own as a community or for the ministry, the apostolate. It is a big concern.

I don't know why they attack sisters. Those who kidnapped us were pleading with us to forgive them, that we were not the targets. And they repeated it a few times. Then, they let us go because you will not get anything from us and we don't have what you are looking for; but again, you still see them attacking sisters, so I don't know why.



Nuns attend a mass funeral service in the parish hall of St. Francis Xavier Church in Owo, Nigeria, June 17, 2022. The service was for at least 50 victims killed in a June 5 attack by gunmen during Mass at the church. (CNS/Reuters/Temilade Adelaja)

In what ways have these attacks and abductions affected the works, ministries and religious activities of nuns in Nigeria?

The frequent attacks have badly affected the works of the religious, especially in those states that are badly affected. The sisters in Niger state in the northern part of the country cannot go out freely to attend to people. They have been harassed in their houses, and some workers have been kidnapped.

Your congregation, the Medical Missionaries of Mary, is known for providing health-related services to people. Amid these attacks and abductions, are sisters still able to go to communities for medical outreach?

Not at all. Sisters living in the north are no longer living in that community; they are now perching somewhere, ministering to people. Because of the frequent killings and attacks, they had to abandon and leave our house there to live somewhere and still attend to people.

They can't go to places they go for outreach and can't be outside at certain times of the day. So it's really affecting us.

Most places they would like to go for outreach is to health clinics. They don't go there anymore.

In August, four nuns of the Sisters of Jesus the Savior, a religious group in southern Nigeria, were abducted on their way to a thanksgiving Mass of another nun in Imo state. What are your fears and concerns amid persecution against the church?

The sisters in Imo state are encountering the worst state of poverty; hence, people are not free to go to farm, market or do their business most days.

There is something we were supposed to do in Imo state. We couldn't go there, so we had to change it. Our sisters are in Imo state, but to go to that community and

carry out certain projects, we couldn't do it this year. So it's badly affecting us.

Most places the sisters go for work, they don't go there anymore. And when it's time for them to go out, too, they are very careful. All these things are restricting our work.

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With the spate of violence in the country, how are you and other nuns in your community dealing with the anxiety?

The amount of killings and atrocities this year all over the world seems to be worse than ever. Many people now live in fear, tension and anxiety, and these affect their health.

We, the Medical Missionaries of Mary sisters, are "wounded healers"; therefore, we engage our own pains and vulnerability and go out to deal with the pains of those coming to us and living around us. We try to be more available for each other, listening and sharing.

We also avail of any therapy for counseling when necessary. Prayer isn't enough.

In a society where there are increasing attacks against the church, priests and nuns, what does being a sister mean to you, and what has been your source of encouragement?

Being a sister in this hostile world of today poses more challenges to me. It calls me to be kinder, sympathetic and to be another Christ to give hope to the hopeless and voice to the voiceless.

My source of strength or encouragement in all these is that God is always there for us. His reassuring words always come across. Prayer remains the master key.

Amid these attacks and abductions, what would be your message to other nuns in Nigeria?

We are very supportive of and caring for one another. We suffer, cry and laugh together. I would like to advise other sisters to be very supportive to one another. Communication should be of paramount importance.