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Women religious are pictured in a file photo entering a church in Abuja, Nigeria. (OSV News/Reuters/Afolabi Sotunde)

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PAPIRI, Nigeria — January 6, 2026

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Following the liberation of all the children and staff abducted from St. Mary's School in the Nigerian town of Papiri, the Sisters of Our Lady of Apostles, who manage the school, have expressed deep gratitude for the support received during the trying period.

"With profound relief and thanksgiving, we celebrate that every child and every staff member has now returned to safety after weeks of fear, uncertainty, and intense prayer," said Sr. Mary Barron, congregation leader of the OLA Sisters.

She added that "From the first hours of the abduction, the OLA family — together with the local church in the Diocese of Kontagora, the families of Papiri, and communities across Nigeria — was upheld by a remarkable global solidarity of prayer and advocacy. We extend our deepest and most heartfelt gratitude to all who stood with us during this painful time," she said.

The OLA sisters said they are grateful to religious congregations around the world who organized vigils, rosaries and days of fasting. They acknowledged dioceses, parishes and Catholic communities and schools that kept the children and staff at the center of their Advent prayer.

Others to whom the religious women feel indebted include Interfaith partners, especially Muslim leaders and communities, who joined their voices and prayers for peace; human rights organizations, civil society groups and diplomatic partners who raised awareness and advocated tirelessly on behalf of the children and staff of St. Mary's.

Sr. Mary said they're grateful to "All people of goodwill who refused to remain silent and who carried this suffering community in their hearts."

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"Your compassion became a lifeline. Your prayers strengthened the captives and their families. Your advocacy ensured that the world did not look away," the congregational leader emphasized, adding that the sisters "are deeply moved by this outpouring of love and solidarity."

As the children and staff begin the long process of healing from the trauma they endured, the OLA sisters have asked everyone to continue holding the liberated children and staff in prayer.

The sisters also renewed their "plea for greater protection of schools and vulnerable communities throughout Nigeria. Every child deserves to learn without fear. Every family deserves to live in safety," they reiterated.

The sisters further paid tribute to the Papiri community for its courage and resilience during a very difficult time.

"We give thanks to God for the safe return of the captives. We give thanks for the courage of the Papiri community. And we give thanks for the global family of faith and goodwill who stood with us in hope. We continue to hold in prayer many people who are still held in captivity in Nigeria."