

THE MESSAGE OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

DON ÁNGEL FERNÁNDEZ ARTIME

ONE MISSIONARY RETURNS; ANOTHER 34 LEAVE FOR THE MISSIONS

I chose this enigmatic title for my greeting this month because I want to make reference to one Salesian who spent 18 months in captivity and another 34 SDBs and FMAs who will leave for the missions in various parts of the world.



Ever since the very first one on November 11, 1875, there have been 148 missionary expeditions for our Salesian Family. These evoke the profound feeling that grace is at work. Still, before speaking more specifically about this, I wish to bring to light something which is a true grace and gift from God. It was late in the day on September 12 that we received a call in which we were informed that Fr. Tom Uzhunnalil had been freed and was on his way to Rome on a flight coming from the Sultanate of Oman.

This news, 18 months after his capture, months filled with fear and with hope, was altogether wonderful. We welcomed home our Salesian confrere Tom. He returned weakened in physical strength, for he had lost 66 lbs. (30 kg), 38% of his body mass, and was unsteady on his feet because he had not been permitted to exercise that entire time. Nonetheless, he arrived strong in spirit, calm, lucid, and filled with peace and serenity.

This reality caused me to raise my thoughts to ponder on how God is able to make of the weakest and most fragile a “sign” of His presence and power. Fr. Tom shared with us how he had lived those 18 months in peace, with much serenity, thanking God each night for the day past – even if he had been forbidden to leave his cell or see daylight. He also told us that if one day he should have reached the end of his life, he would have gone serenely to his meeting with God. Our confrere Tom prayed every day for his captors and for their lives. He prayed for Mother Teresa of Calcutta’s Missionary Sisters of Charity, who had been assassinated in front of him. He prayed for his dear ones, for the Salesian Family, and for the young.

Since he could not celebrate Holy Mass with bread and wine, he daily recited the prayers of the Mass from memory, and this gave him great strength. He kept his thoughts peaceful and prayed – prayed and thought peacefully – keeping tight rein over them lest they be obscured by anxiety or fear.

Now he has returned to us filled with peace and serenity. Indubitably, he grew very much in his spiritual depths from having lived this painful experience. He expects nothing, nor does he hope or look for any recognition. Essentially, he shall continue serving and working serenely.

We also spoke about his status as a missionary. He was in Yemen as a missionary, and he felt himself to be a missionary more than ever during those 18 months – even if he could “do nothing.” Actually, he “did everything” because he offered up each day with total innocence.

“I MYSELF WAS THE EUCHARISTIC SACRIFICE. MY OWN BODY WAS A LIVING SACRIFICE PLEASING TO GOD”

At the same time that our brother Tom was in Rome, another 21 SDBs and 13 FMAs received the missionary cross. All of them, with their hearts prepared to serve where they are most needed, leaving behind the world and the life familiar to them, are leaving behind closeness to the ones they love, so as to forge new ties in new lands by accompanying other persons, other sensitivities, and other peoples.

A bridge between Fr. Tom and the new missionaries was quickly built. His witness to these new missionaries was the witness of a life given for others.

These are the things we lived just a few weeks ago in September – and it is in no way make-believe! It is the very life of these men and women; it is the life of believers who have decided to give themselves in an absolute and radical way. It is, undoubtedly, a witness which challenges each of us.