

Free at Last! Fr. Michael Sinnott Will Continue his Mission

This Column is by Columban Father Shay Cullen; Fr. Shay's columns are published in The Manila Times, in publications in Ireland, the UK, Hong Kong, and on-line.)

Free at last! That is the moment we were all waiting for this week and it has brought relief and happiness to every Missionary and person of good will that has been in solidarity and prayer for my fellow missionary Father Michael Sinnott for the past 30 days since his abduction. He is well and healthy and in good spirit, joking during a press conference despite his ordeal and promising to return to his mission helping disabled children.

According to Father Mick, the abduction was rough and his hands were tied when he was pushed into the back of a van in the garden of the Columban Missionaries' House in Pagadian city on October 11, then into a speed boat where he was blindfolded for the trip across the bay. He spent the first ten days in a mosquito infested swamp but was then moved to a densely forested area where he could walk a short distance to exercise. He talked with his captor in Visayan and shared stories with them.

They had an efficient supply system that brought in his medicine and food mostly sliced loaf. "We got what you call sliced loaf, which they got especially for me, I had that twice a day usually, and then some rice for supper. They had sandwich spread to put between the bread...I mean after a month, the regular menu was the same everyday. It was bound to become monotonous", he said.

Father Mick had a quadruple heart bypass a few years ago and there was great concern that his heart would be affected. But the medication arrived and he was alright. He said he was well treated and that his captors were most very kind and did all they could to make life as easy as possible under the circumstances.

He was kidnapped by a group of the Lumad Indigenous people, not the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). He was told, in fact, that his release, as it seems was managed by the highest officials of the MILF who had been accused by the Government of carrying out the kidnapping which they strenuously denied. They told him that they were not going to kill him and were after money and this was a huge psychological relief. He then set his mind and heart on prayer for the strength to survive the jungle and for his freedom to return to his mission running a special school for disabled children.

During his conversation with his captors they said they were holding him for ransom but when apparently none was paid and he was to be freed he asked why. "They said it was important to get the message out to the international media. They want to mention that they are the original "Lumad of Mindanao" who lost their homeland and everything else when the merchants came", he said.

They were also angry at the MILF for condemning the kidnapping for ransom and saying

that it was against Islamic teaching when they (the MILF) are "getting support and money from outside....while they themselves (the Lumad) have no means of getting money for arms and bullets except by ransom", Father Sinnott said. The day that Father Michael was released, it coincided with the opening of a national conference in Manila on the plight of the Lumad, an oppressed and exploited people.

On November 4, the call came for him to be brought out of the forest but after hiking for twenty minutes his hopes were dashed when a mobile phone message ordered them to stay as the typhoon was blowing in Luzon and the waves were "too high". Last Wednesday, the order came to move out and at 4.30 AM, Thursday November 12th, he was on his way to Zamboanga City escorted by members of the MILF. "Now I believe that I am really free", he told his escorts. He was turned over to Ambassador Rafael Seguis, Chairperson of the Government Peace Panel and flown to an air base in Manila where he was met by President Gloria Arroyo and immediately after he enjoyed a warm welcome by the Irish Ambassador Richard O' Brien, he was embraced by his fellow Columban Fathers. Undaunted he told the media that he will return to his mission in Pagadian, "They won't kidnap me again, he said, I'm too old, perhaps somebody younger", he said smiling. END

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