



An Interview with Fr Prem Kumar SJ

Indian Jesuit Fr Alexis Prem Kumar SJ, 47, has been released by the Taliban after eight months in captivity in February 2015. Fr Prem had worked for three years as Afghanistan country director for Jesuit Refugee Service in Herat province when he was abducted by gunmen in June 2, 2014. An interview with him, when he visited Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, Pune.

AJRS: Can you please share something about your experience of captivity in Afghanistan?

I was there in Afghanistan since 2011; was kidnapped on 2nd June 2014 and released on 22nd February 2015. I was in captivity for 8 months and 20 days. It was really an unexpected event. I was almost speechless when they kidnapped me. They gave me some hope about my release on the evening of the first day in captivity but it never happened. I stayed at 9 different locations. Just as any human being, I too didn't like the captivity. I would not like anybody to undergo this captivity. Each and every moment, I wanted to be free. After a month, one morning when I was weeping on thinking of my fate that I had chains both in my hands and legs most of the time of the day,

the guard asked me why I was weeping and I mentioned him about my longing for the release. He told that I would be released in 4 days. That night, I had a strange dream in which I saw the number 256, which became a consoling factor later. There was the festival of Ramadan and the feast of St. Ignatius in the month of July. I was hoping for my release during those times, which didn't happen. All through my captivity, I was doing the Spiritual Exercises. The expectation and eagerness of my release got subsided over a period of time and I surrendered myself to God. Another interesting aspect was that they gave me a radio and I used to listen to Vatican Radio on it.

The incidents that took place in June, August, October and January helped me live the life of captivity in hope. At the end of June, they told me that there was a talk between the 'Taliban' of India and the Taliban of Afghanistan to release me. In August, on the 100th day of captivity, I heard from the Vatican Tamil Radio program, Ms. Sushma Swaraj, the external affairs Minister saying that I was safe in Afghanistan. In October, two higher officials of the Taliban took my video interview to start the negotiations with JRS or whoever was interested in my release. In the middle of January, they informed that the negotiation was going on well and I would be free in three weeks. As soon as they talked about my possible release, the number 256 suddenly popped before my mind; February 12th, 2015 was the 256th day of my captivity, which was the 2nd death anniversary of my mother. I used to ask my mother for her intercession as she was in heaven. Then I was sure of my release on that day. But it took 10 more days. When I was doing my spiritual exercises, I used to do the colloquy (dialogue) with Mother Mary. She used to tell me to talk to my mother. Thus the captivity was also a time of a long interaction with my mother. Though my life in captivity was a physical and psychological struggle but it was a spiritually consoling experience.

AJRS: Can you elaborate on some of your consoling and challenging encounters?

I would rephrase it as one consoling person and a challenging person. I had a cook named Obeida, who used to come and sit with me after his work and shout and yell at me. I was scared of him. When I was shifted to the 5th location, another person named Ahajan came. It was a miracle and the most consoling experience. He was a God sent man, who showed compassion. He trimmed my moustaches, gave warm clothes during winter and treated the boils on my leg with various local things. He even gave me saline. He was gentle with everybody. He was the personification of goodness. Even I imagined (and I told) him that if freedom returned to Afghanistan, I would be happy to work with him for the people.

The challenging person was Bismillah. He wouldn't allow me to call him by name as he thought I would pollute his name. One day, I touched his water can and he threw the water away. He treated me like an untouchable. He was my guard for a majority of time during captivity from September. When he went for holidays, it was like heaven even in captivity. He wouldn't give me enough time even to go to the toilet, made me work and wash his clothes. I later understood his character, he was a servant in the Taliban and he wanted to be a master over me. Once I realized it, I was completely at ease with him. He was the only one who could understand my language. When I listened to Vatican Radio, I heard a talk of Fr Arul Selvan SJ (my novice master), who spoke about the Jesus prayer. I started using the prayer (Jesus, my savior) when he was torturing me and this gave me peace and finally we became quite good friends. Thus, Jesus prayer helped me to make the most challenging person also my friend.

AJRS: How did your mission as a priest evolve during this challenging time?

In the morning I used to do the Spiritual Exercises. I could manage to do the Spiritual Exercises 3 times. In the afternoon, I used to say Holy Mass without bread and wine, but it was very enriching and a meaningful experience. I used the scriptural reflections which I heard in the morning on the Vatican radio for my mass and I used to give sermons too. Two passages struck me a lot; first was the healing of the paralytic man and the second was the annunciation. It gave me tremendous hope. In the beginning I was thinking I was suffering more than Jesus. I felt I was alone in my suffering unlike some people being present in the suffering of Jesus. Later I realized my mistake or my wrong reasoning. After sometime only my suffering was the focus and I used to pray for my own release. I felt that this was also wrong. Then finally I realized that my freedom is linked with the freedom of the suffering humanity. Then I used to pray for the suffering humanity including myself. I thank God that there were enough days in my captivity for this realization. Ultimately a priest is meant for the people; that realization helped to surrender everything to God and not to be worried too much about myself.

AJRS: How has this experience strengthened your ministry?

When I worked hard in Afghanistan, nobody knew me. Now I became a well known person [laughs]. I am happy that so many prayed for me as I was a Jesuit working in JRS. Now I have got a new life, and I have to be more responsible. Though some told me to come back to the Madurai Province, I realized working with JRS is a response of my greater responsibility. I am grateful. I work presently as the assistant director of JRS South Asia. Though it is not good to go back to Afghanistan now, I would be happy to say at least a good bye to my students and staff who prayed for me and struggled for me. Now I work in Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu; it is a very tough situation. The Tamils in Sri Lanka and the Sri Lankan refugees in India look for a

bright future; they don't have a right political answer to their more than half a century struggle. They are treated as secondary citizens. I am happy to be a part of their struggle.

AJRS: Can you please elaborate the works of Jesuits and collaborators in Afghanistan?

After I was kidnapped, Jesuits stopped all the activities to put the pressure. But we realized after a month that children were suffering. So we again began the activities. We didn't stop any of the activities including the school from where I was kidnapped (though with some changes). We work in four provinces of Afghanistan. We teach English and computer in all four provinces, run a school at Sohadat, a returnee township and help a local NGO to run a school for the Hazara community who are backward and yet show a lot of interest in Education in Herat province, conduct capacity building program at the Blind School in Kabul province and organize Konkur (eligibility test for university) programs in Bamyan and Daikundi provinces. I like to mention two important programs of JRS Afghanistan.

First is about Training Leaders for Tomorrow (TLT) program. We had a 2 year English program from 2009 to 2011 for 60 girls to capacitate and empower them. As we left after 2 years (as project was over), local staff took it up and they taught them free of cost for a few months. Then we supported them, and gave them a 2nd level of education including personality development, leadership, media awareness etc in 2011. Another interesting component of this program was 'Each one teach some'. From 45 students who participated in the 2nd level program, we selected 22 as our staff and now we have a program called 'Training Leaders for Tomorrow' by them since 2012 and the motto is 'Each one teach Twenty'. Continuous commitment and constant involvement provides greater yields.

Another important work is JCHEMA (Jesuit Common Higher Education at Margins). It happens all over the JRS world, where higher education opportunities are given to the people at

margins. They get diploma degrees. We want to create linkages with more Indian colleges and universities so that they can have more opportunities for online and onsite education. We do many other programs depending on the need of the hour.

AJRS: Your message on the year of mercy!

For this I take the triple mission of JRS. In today's context, mercy is an important aspect. For refugees, loss of kith and kin during war gives formidable pain and so they need **accompaniment**. Today the church has plenty of human and financial resources. When we do lots of **services**, we should ask whether our services are reaching the poor and are we in touch with them. We have got plenty of skills; we should use them for networking and **advocacy** and to challenge the policy makers. I don't think all need to be in the field with the poor but all need to be for the poor even if they hold key positions; some need to be there at the top level to change the government to become pro poor. In today's war economy, church should advocate to end wars so that refugees won't be born. So I plead to all of you to take this triple mission of JRS seriously, i.e. **Accompaniment, Service and Advocacy**. According to me, it would make the year of Mercy much more meaningful for all of us.

By Br Arun CST, on behalf of *AJRS*