News
Spirituality



Marianite Sr. Suellen Tennyson in September 2022 (CNS/Clarion Herald/Peter Finney Jr.)



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Around Christmas in 2021, Marianite Sr. Suellen Tennyson, then supervising her congregation's medical clinic in Yalgo, Burkina Faso, in West Africa, received a text message from her nephew, James Downing, who lives in Richland Hills, Texas, near Fort Worth.

"Aunt Sue, I have a picture for you," Downing typed, drawing out the suspense.

A few seconds later, Downing uploaded a black-and-white picture, the kind that needs to be pressed proudly to the refrigerator door with a magnet.

"It was a picture of a sonogram," Tennyson said, recalling her unbridled joy.

It didn't take long for Tennyson to decipher what the sonogram meant: Her nephew's wife, Kim, who had suffered through years of infertility, whose first child was stillborn and who had subsequently adopted three children, was expecting a baby in her mid-40s.

"It was a little miracle," Tennyson recalled thinking in her post-Christmas excitement.

When Tennyson was abducted four months later in April 2022 from her Burkina Faso convent — bound and gagged in the middle of the night and ridden through the forest on the back of a motorcycle — she was beginning a five-month journey into the inscrutable hands of God.

Tennyson didn't know much about her first band of kidnappers, who grabbed her from her bed, barefoot and without glasses or prescription medicine, and told her to hang on to the back of the motorcycle.

But a short time later, she was turned over to a rival Muslim group. During the subsequent five months of isolation, she slept outside under a handcrafted tent-like

structure with branches and leaves for a roof and a cloth that could be adjusted to keep the sun out of her eyes.

Other than her small group of caretakers, who fed her a daily regimen of spaghetti and sardines, she never saw another human being.

But something happened early on in her captivity that allowed Tennyson to continue clinging to hope: The Muslim man who now was her lead captor took a look at her feet, bruised and bloodied from being dashed against the rocks and branches, and stooped down to wash them.

"When that Muslim man was washing my feet, I knew he didn't understand the symbolism of it, but it was God speaking to me through him," Tennyson told the Clarion Herald, newspaper of the Archdiocese of New Orleans.

There were no books to read, and certainly no Bible. Her captor found a few scraps of paper and a pen on which Tennyson could keep track of the days and the weeks and the months.

She prayed virtually every waking moment, reciting from memory the prayers of the Mass and making a spiritual Communion. And, she continued to think about the sonogram and about Kim.

"I was super anxious because Kim had had so much trouble getting pregnant and because of what happened with her first pregnancy," Tennyson said. "I was praying, praying, praying."

When for some still unknown reason on Aug. 29, 2022, the Muslim group handed over Tennyson to U.S. authorities, she remembers the first question she asked as she was being transported to freedom at an American Air Force base in Niger: Did Kim have her baby?

"That was one of the things I needed to find out right away," Tennyson said. "Honestly, I'm not sure who told me, but it could have been the FBI because they were the ones who were keeping in touch with the family. They told me, 'Yes, Kim had the baby!' "

Iris Patricia Downing was born July 27, nearly one month to the day before Tennyson's release.

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Tennyson, 84, made her first public comments about her five months of captivity Feb. 4 at the New Orleans archdiocesan celebration of the World Day for Consecrated Life.

She is getting stronger; she has nearly completed her medical checkups for her heart and bloodwork; she has resumed spiritual direction "to help me work through what God has been doing in me through all of this"; she is providing home care for an elderly family friend who has cancer; she is buoyed that her medical clinic in Africa has survived and is still serving the people; and she is driving a car again in the nonstop traffic in Covington, north of New Orleans.

"The good news is I just passed the driving test," she said. "I can't get over all the traffic over here. Our insurance carrier says that once you turn 80, you have to take this test, which is more of a cognitive test, and then they take you driving. They didn't have me parallel park. I was surprised."

She is reveling in the blessedness of the normal.

"I'm back to looking like I used to look," she said, laughing. "When I look in the mirror, I'm saying, 'Yeah, this is me again.' I'm really looking forward to being just me again."

In her spiritual processing of the ordeal, she has come to believe it was part of a plan.

"It was like, 'Suellen, it's not about you,' " she said. "I kept telling God, 'I'm tired and I'm lonesome and I don't feel good and I want to go home,' but God kept saying, 'It's not all about you.' God was telling me to remain peacefully patient. I knew God was working in a lot of people during this time, and I think a lot of good things have happened in many different people, just in bringing us all together to pray. Look at how many people joined together in prayer. It's just awesome."

Her Muslim captor, the one who washed her feet, must have known she was about to be released and asked her near the end of her captivity, "What will you say about us?"

"I have nothing but good to say about you," Tennyson told him.

"These men took good care of me," she said. "They were respectful. They never disrespected me in any way. And, they did what they could to make a very difficult situation less difficult for me."

Tennyson has had several chances in the last few months to hold Iris, now 7 months old, in her arms. A smile never leaves Iris' face.

"She's an absolutely precious little baby girl," Tennyson said. "She's got this biggest smile. All the time, she's just filled with joy. She's a perfect example of somebody who's full of joy because she knows she's totally loved."

And, now, the great-aunt in the mirror is smiling back at God.

"I can't tell you how many times I asked my captor, 'Why did those people take me? It doesn't make any sense. Why?' And, his words to me were, 'To make you strong.' It suddenly dawned on me that that was not this Muslim man talking. That was God speaking through him."