

Local News

Father Jenco preaches compassion for former captors

By Lee Strong

During the first three months Servite Father Lawrence M. Jenco served in Beirut, Lebanon, as the director of Catholic Relief Services (CRS), he frequently slept on the floor of his room because of the almost nightly shellings of that war-torn city. As the shells fell one night, he wrote on the wall, "Dear God, I will to live."

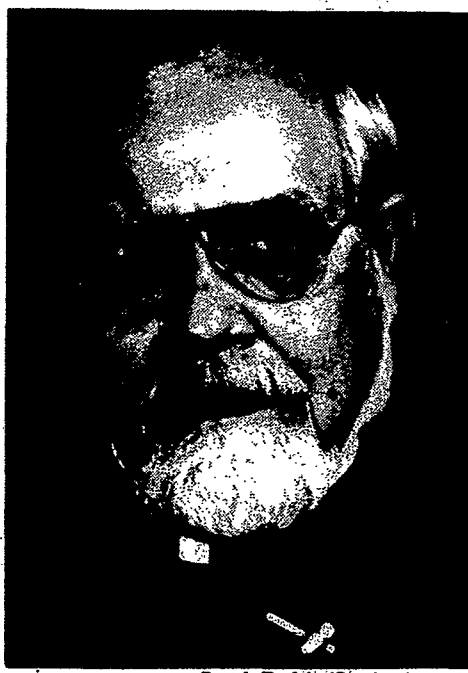
That will to live helped to sustain him through the next 19 months while he was held hostage in Lebanon by Muslim extremists.

Father Jenco described the experiences of those months to an audience of more than 300 gathered in St. John Fisher College's Kearney Auditorium Wednesday, Nov. 18. He also told the audience of a need for "peace, reconciliation and forgiveness" in the world, and challenged listeners to hold the American government accountable both for its actions and for its failures to act.

At several points, Father Jenco expressed anger that he was released on July 26, 1987, through the Iran-contra arms deal. He said the deal was not only a mistake, but was also illegal and morally wrong. Despite his long months of suffering, the priest said he would rather have remained a captive than to have been freed by the arms deal.

"The arms will kill innocent men, women and children — all for the release of one hostage," Father Jenco lamented. "The money from that deal is being used for the Contras, which will result in more violence to innocent men, women and children. That's too much for just one man," he said.

Father Jenco's ordeal began when members of Islamic Jihad (Holy War) kidnapped him January 8, 1985, as he was returning home from his CRS office. He was moved around the city in the trunks of a series of cars. Later, bandaged "like a mummy" with cloth stuffed in his mouth and only his nostrils left uncovered, he was hidden in the tire rack under a truck during a four-hour ride to the first of the prisons in which he would be held. The roads were so bumpy that he injured his nose and had to breathe through coagulating blood for most of the trip.



Bonnie Traflet/Courier-Journal

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Fr. Lawrence Jenco

"While under that truck, I prayed the Jesus Prayer — 'Lord Jesus, have mercy on me' — to keep me going," the priest related to the audience. "When they cut the bandages off (at the end of the trip), I said, 'He is risen from the dead, alleluia.'"

In a series of prisons, Father Jenco was kept naked or dressed only in underwear. He was frequently chained to walls, and was blindfolded whenever one of his captors was in the room. For the first seven months of his captivity, he was isolated — spending two months chained hand and foot in a locked closet.

Besides the conditions, he had to deal with the cruelty of his guards. On the first day of the priest's captivity, one guard leaned over to him and said, "You are going to die." In one prison where he was kept on the floor, a guard wearing cowboy boots stood on his

head. "I'm still uncomfortable when I see cowboy boots," Father Jenco revealed.

One night when the priest was snoring, a guard threw a lemon in his face. Juice dripped into his infected eyes, and because his hands were bound, he couldn't wipe it away.

Another time, a guard entered Father Jenco's room to inquire about the metallic substance in the priest's teeth. "I told them they were fillings, but he said I was lying, they were transmitters, and closed the door. I lay there waiting for him to come back to pull my teeth."

Father Jenco admitted that during the hard times, he sometimes told God, "I am not Job." Three things helped him to endure, nourishing him during his captivity and all his sufferings. The first two were scripture and the Eucharist.

Without a Bible for the first seven months of his captivity, he spent his days recalling passages of Scripture. He celebrated daily Mass using bread he'd saved from his meals, reciting the Eucharistic prayers from memory. "One day (while celebrating Mass) a guard came in and asked what I had in my hand," the priest recalled. "I said, 'Jesus Christ.'" At that answer, the guard left.

His third means of sustenance was communion. After seven months of isolation, Father Jenco was moved into a room with another hostage, the Rev. Benjamin Weir, a Presbyterian minister. The two were later moved into another room, with three additional hostages: Terry Anderson, chief Middle East correspondent for the Associated Press; David Jacobsen, director of the American University Hospital in Beirut; and Thomas Sutherland, head of the American University's school of agriculture.

The five men read the Rev. Weir's Bible (Father Jenco later received one, too), conducted prayer services, and celebrated daily Mass. Father Jenco described the sign of peace as being such a powerful and sustaining experience that they repeated it twice daily — in the morning Mass and in the nightly prayer service.

Conditions in the prisons also began to improve at the time the five hostages were moved into one room. A doctor who treated Father Jenco's eyes ordered the guard to keep the hostages in cleaner conditions and to allow them to shower regularly. When Father Jenco and Sutherland complained about tooth problems, a dentist was brought in to treat them. The hostages were also allowed to walk about free of their chains and blindfolds.

Relations with the guards changed as well. Father Jenco recalled that by the time of his release, the guards were calling him "Little Father." On Christmas Eve, 1985, the hostages discovered that negotiations they had hoped would set them free for Christmas had failed. To help their captives feel better, the guards came in Christmas morning with a cake and sang "Happy Birthday Jesus."

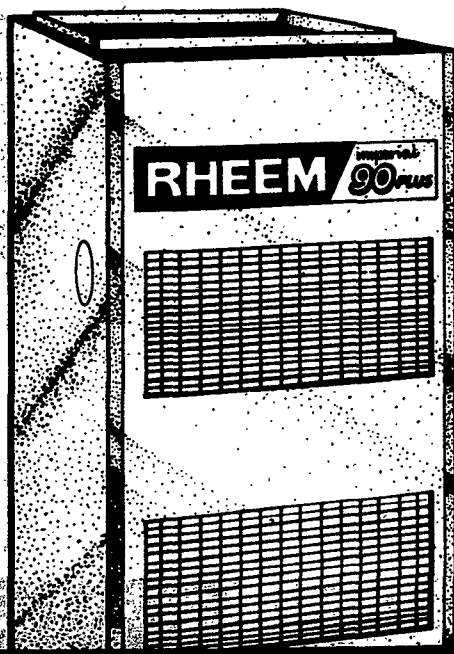
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