

MISSION

Abducted nuns released in Haiti, witnesses of faith amid social chaos

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Six sisters of the *Congrégation des Soeurs de Saint-Anne*, a Canadian women's religious institute, were freed on January 25 in Haiti, less than a week in captivity. They had been kidnapped on the 19th in broad daylight, in the centre of the capital Port-au-Prince, a

short distance from the presidential palace. Armed men had blocked the minibus in which they were travelling, hijacked it and fled, taking with them the driver of the vehicle and the niece of one of the sisters who was then released on January 23. The kidnapers had demanded a ransom of three million dollars. It is currently unknown under what terms the release took place, whether the police played a role, and whether the requested sum or if an alternative lower sum was paid.

Without doubt, one of the approximately 300 armed gangs that control 80 per cent of the capital and use kidnappings for extortion to finance themselves, was responsible for the kidnapping. In 2023, 2,490 kidnappings were reported, almost twice as many as in 2022. Last year also recorded an increase in murders, almost 5,000, 119% more than in 2022, and violence in general. Armed gangs,' stresses a UN report on the situation in Haiti presented on January 23, 'act with impunity, Haitians live in a state of permanent insecurity. Added to this are the economic hardships, with the poverty rate also growing steadily. An estimated 31 per cent of the population, 3.6 million people, live below the poverty line, on less than \$2.15 a day, and there are 4.8 million Haitians in a state of food insecurity, which means, for adults and children, facing the nagging problem of getting enough food every day.

On January 22, the archbishop of the capital, Monsignor Max Leroy Méridor, and the president of the Haitian Conference of Religious, Father Morachel Bonhomme, issued a statement calling on the government institutions to definitively protect the population. "These kidnappings fill Haiti's consecrated men and women and souls of goodwill with sadness and fear," the communiqué reads. "On many occasions the Church has denounced their silence, which is akin to an attitude of contempt for the suffering of the people. The nation's boat is truly adrift and needs to be righted'. On January 24, they had called for a national day of prayer, meditation and Eucharistic adoration to ask God for the salvation of the kidnapped people.

After six days their prayers were answered. It was a great day of celebration when the sisters and their driver returned home. But in everyone's heart remains the anxiety about the uncertain future and the question: whose turn will it be next? In Haiti, violence does not spare the religious who, however well liked by the common people for the good they receive, are also victims of theft, robbery and kidnapping. For some, the choice to stand by the Haitian people and share their plight has cost them their lives. This is the case of Sister Luisa Dell'Orto, Little Sister of the Gospel of Charles de Foucauld, who was killed in 2022 in Port-au-Prince by thugs who attacked her probably in a robbery. She was 65 years old. She had been on mission in Haiti for 20 years. She

ran Charles House, a centre in a very poor neighbourhood that she had helped rebuild after the 2010 earthquake and where hundreds of children found a safe space in which to spend their after-school hours.

The religious and lay people who work in Haiti to bring an evangelical witness of mercy, proximity and fraternity as a sign of Christian hope, are among those whom the Fides news agency, in its annual report on murdered missionaries, defines as 'witnesses', and not martyrs, because they are victims not of religious hatred, but of common violence: men and women aware, choosing to share the hardships and pitfalls of those who live in contexts characterised by material and moral degradation, to put their very lives at risk, determined to do so in order to stand by the faithful entrusted to them even though they know they may be victims of the very people they care for. In 2021 in Haiti, missionaries from Christian Aid Ministries and some of their family members were kidnapped, a total of 17 people including five children. Fortunately, they did manage to escape. "We go to dangerous places in many parts of the world," they explained to those who asked why they do missionary work specifically in Haiti, "we do it because they are also usually the places where there is the greatest need. And that is what Christian Aid Ministries has been doing for decades. If we had only gone where it is safe, then we would have stayed at home'.

In 2021, Haiti had made a plea to the world for help, which the United Nations relaunched, but to no avail. Caribbean countries promised to send troops to help the police, other countries allocated funds to help the country. The most concrete proposal came from Kenya, which offered to send one thousand police officers last July. This is still under discussion. Kenya has said it is confident it can free the Haitian population from the grip of violence. Not everyone is so confident, not least because the Kenyan police is known for its 'strong hand', to put it mildly. Several times its officers have been accused of human rights violations, including extrajudicial killings and torture. During the Covid-19 pandemic they shot to kill those found on the street despite being banned from leaving their homes.