On November 22, 2022, German missionary Fr. Hans-Joachim Lohre was kidnapped by jihadists as he prepared to celebrate mass in Bamako, Mali (western Africa). At the site of the kidnapping, his parishioners found only the priest's cross. He would remain a prisoner in the Sahel for 370 days, "accompanied by the Lord and your prayers."

In Rome, at his first conference organized since his release, the priest spoke of what he described as a "sabbatical time" devoted to prayer and contemplation. He said:

"A car arrived at full speed. I thought it was a bit early for Mass. A man got out and said to me, 'Father, you're being detained.'" It was 7:30 a.m. on the feast of Christ the King, when Father "Ha-Jo" — pronounced "Ayo" — was taken away. He was handcuffed, hooded, and loaded into the back of a car. A kidnapper told him, "Don't be afraid; we're not going to do anything to you. We're good guys, we're from Al Qaeda."

After hours on the road, he was stripped of all his belongings -- including liturgical vestments and materials, his Bible, and his rosary. Everything was taken from him, except for a T-shirt on which was written "I love my king," a

sign for him on the solemnity of Christ the King. "They burned everything (...) but they can't take my faith," he realized at the time.

As a young man, Fr. Ha-Jo had intended to become a pastoral worker and start a family back home in Germany. However, he felt irresistibly called to join the White Fathers (thus named after their white garb) after meeting them in his diocese. He was sent to Mali for the first time 40 years ago and has since spent 28 years there. He worked incessantly, particularly in the field of inter-religious dialogue. Eventually he became so fatigued that he asked his superiors for a sabbatical year not long before his abduction.

He said: ”When I was kidnapped, I told myself I was starting my sabbatical: no more appointments, no more work, no more conferences to organize, no stress... and lots of time to pray," he said humorously. He knows that hostage priests are usually kidnapped for four years before being released, so he didn’t expect his release after just one year, a record and "a miracle" in his view.

Fr. Ha-Jo also remembered what he’d read Austrian psychiatrist Viktor Frankl's book on Auschwitz camp prisoners, *Man s Search for Meaning*. In

it, Frankl explains that the survivors turned either to hatred or resignation, except those "who gave meaning to that meaninglessness.” And this is where he focused on prayer as a means to help him during this ordeal.

Fr. Ha-Jo then decided to "entrust the day of his liberation to God." He took as his reference point the words of Genesis, uttered by Joseph when rescuing his brothers, who had previously handed him over: "You had planned to do me harm: God turned it into good." Fr. Ha-Jo no longer had a Bible, but he was fortunate enough to know many passages by heart to accompany him through his ordeal.

While being taken to a bush camp in the Sahel, the missionary learned that he had been kidnapped because of the presence of German soldiers helping the Malian army in Garo. A few days later, he was taken to another camp, home to other "very religious" jihadists. They tried to convert him."He answered their questions and defended his faith, without ever being perturbed or bullied.

He was given enough to eat, including bread, a piece of which he saved for Mass. Fr. Ha-Jo was also granted a radio, with which he could listen to

local stations as well as the English- and French-language broadcasts of Vatican Radio. He recounts how he was able to hear Pope Francis at Mass in the Vatican on Christmas Day, and was ecstatic.

He was also able to follow all the major Catholic events of the year: the World Youth Day in Lisbon, the Synod... But his greatest joy came when he picked up a Malian radio station claiming that Muslims and Christians were praying together for his release. "I've never felt more missionary than at that moment," he says with emotion.

At the end of December, he was taken to the desert, where he was entrusted to the care of Tuaregs. He suffered a little from the cold at night, despite the gift of a cashmere coat from one of his jailers, but then he began a "real prayer retreat."

He spent "22 hours out of 24" lying under a tarpaulin, only able to stretch his legs on a path marked out by his guards. Later, he was taken to a mountainous region. There he met up with other hostages. Throughout this period, he was fed and cared for... and was able to devote himself entirely to prayer, including al ong Mass.

His typical day began with a Mass lasting over two hours. He began by invoking the saints of the day, as well as the three saints who accompanied him throughout his captivity: St. Bakhita, who was kidnapped like him and managed to pardon her captors; St. Charles de Foucauld, apostle of the Tuareg people; and his patron saint, St. John the Baptist. Then he continued with the Ordinary of the Mass, before reciting the Gospels in his head, then preaching, imagining himself in one of the communities he served.

Afterwards, he would devote half an hour to prayer intentions, praying for everything he heard on the radio, as well as for his "Malian brothers." He then recited the Offertory and the Eucharistic Prayer. He was able to consecrate the bread he kept for the occasion, and an "imaginary wine," as his jailers refuse to give him any. He noted it couldn’t be valid, but for him it was the real Mass.

At midday, Fr. Ha-Jo prayed the Rosary, and then in the afternoon he devoted two hours to contemplative meditation. He adds that he prayed in

particular so that "those who were in anguish" because of his abduction would receive some of the serenity he had found in his captivity.

Finally, he was told that he would be released, which happened on November 26, 2023, able to see his 92-year-old mother again, who was hospitalized at the time of his abduction. And looking back at all of this, he thanks all those who, like Aaron and Hur supporting Moses' arms in our first reading for his battle, supported him, with all of their prayers.

Prayer is for many of us one of the first things we learn, be it the Lords Prayer, the Sign of the Cross, the Hail Mary. But prayer can sometimes be misunderstood. There are some who we've heard recently say you just have to act, so focus on that, not prayer, or others who say what's the point of prayer. And even if we pray regularly, sometimes prayer can become something we don't think about. Prayer can also be challenging too when things seem to don't work out; so some might say what's the point God's going to do what He's going to do. So why pray at all?

There's a lot that goes into that which is the topic for a retreat or a spiritual conference, but really what it comes down to is journeying with God in the battle of life, day in an day out.

In the first reading this week, the Israelites face conflict for the first time. They are making this long journey through the desert and the Promised Land seems far away, and now Amalek comes and wages war on them. Moses though is not on the front lines of the fighting, but instead goes to the hilltop. And we are told his hands are raised in prayer. As long as the hands are held high, Israel has the better of the fight. Moses however can't hold his arms up all day, and so Aaron and Hur assist him, and Israel ultimately prevails.

It's a great reading that stresses to us the importance of prayer; for while Amalek isn't around anymore, the battles sure are. There's the things in the world, and in our lives. There's the temptations we face, the sins we fall into, there's the vocation we have to do as a part of a family, and just living our lives trying to be people of hope in this world.

So on the one hand, we do need to be people of action. This isn't a monastery; we literally tell people to leave at the end of Mass. However a person's life is not one or the other; prayer entails action. They work together, much like Martha and Mary are both saints. But prayer is so important for us to find true happiness and peace in our lives to keep on being a people of faith, hope and love. What then should we do to keep our hands up?

For one, it's important to remember just why we pray. No, we can't manipulate God. And God will do what God will do. But prayer is a part of virtually all the great figures of the Bible, and the key thing to remember is it is where we raise the mind and heart to God. We plug ourselves into God in a sense, so we come to know HIs presence in our lives. The Catechism notes prayer is "to enter into the presence of Him who awaits us," and what a beautiful way to describe it. No, we can't manipulate Him, but prayer brings us closer to God. It reminds us that He is truly with us to the end of the ages. When we pray, we become less anxious; we find peace, we begin to see God more and more walking with us and God acting. Prayer helps us to find God in our lives, keeping us spiritually healthy. Edith Stein, also known as Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, martyred in Auschwitz,

wrote: ““Prayer is the communication of the soul with God. God is love, and love is goodness giving itself away. It is a fullness of being that does not want to remain enclosed in itself, but rather to share itself with others, to give itself to them, and to make them happy.” Prayer, the essence of our faith, leads us out of ourselves and into sound actions. Edith continues, “Prayer is the highest achievement of which the human spirit is capable. But it is not merely a human achievement. Prayer is a Jacob’s ladder in which the human spirit ascends to God and God’s grace descends to people.” That’s a great image, as when we plug ourselves into God, we can be closer to Him, and grow in grace. Prayer teaches us things like how to love God, but also how to be more aware of our need for God and our sins, how to become a better person, and ultimately how to act.

Understandably prayer can at times be hard. We all go through spiritual valleys, or look at things as Jesus dies on Good Friday, and wonder where are you in all of this Lord? But this is why we also persist in prayer as the Bible tells us, because while we will not have the answer to “why” completely sorted out, the more we pray the more we come to have our soul expanded so we can receive what God wants to give us - perhaps not all the answers right now at this moment, where we just see a tiny bit of the

plans of God as I've shared before, but God's message to us that yes I am with you, yes I love you, yes I put you here for a reason and you can do amazing things with your life to make yourself, others and this world a better place. Prayer helps us to be people of action; if we just act and don't pray, there'll be problems because our actions won't work out. Think of a parent who doesn't think through how to help a growing child who's making some bad choices; or a coach who doesn't look at the tape to know a player's strengths and areas of growth; or trying to assemble something quickly without reading a manual - without the time and care into thinking things through, they don't work. So when we are connected to God, ultimately in there here and now it doesn't always mean everything will work out as we want or think it should be - but we can do so much to keep fighting and winning the battle against evil in our lives and the world, and again find that peace. With prayer we can not only be connected with God, but know then what God wants us to do, and also be better prepared against the deceptions of the Devil.

How then do we pray and what's the right away to do it so our arms are raised high?

For one, persistence. Moses has to keep his hands up the whole time. We do that when we pray daily. It's not a sin if we miss a prayer for instance, but it's a good thing to do every day - finding a time that works - so we can stay connected to God.

And with that, use what works. There are so many great prayers, from traditional prayers, to spending time with the Bible, to silence or just meditation. I mix it up. I like praying the Liturgy of the Hours which I do daily, but I like time for silence too. As I've shared before I find closeness to God in nature, which is where I'll often spend time, and also find peace just coming into this church alone sometimes and spending time in prayer. There was a wise old peasant who met Saint John Vianney who said to him simply "I just look at him and he looks at me." Prayer is as simple as that - a looking at who we love, God, who looks at us with that gaze of love too.

Third, open your heart to God. God knows us inside out. We open up to Him about our sins, our struggles, whatever is on our heart. Remember God is standing with us and nothing can separate us from that love.

And lastly, remember prayer is communal too. We support one another. Consider asking people to pray for you, but also praying with people. Consider praying as a family maybe before bed, or a simple prayer over a meal before you eat with one another. As a staff we pray at our meetings too. We all need people to help support us too and prayer is a great thing to do both as an individual, but with one another, and it teaches others, especially children in the family, about what matters most.

Most of us thankfully will probably not become hostages like Fr. Ha-Jo, but a soul can become a hostage of the Devil with despair, with falling into sin, with thinking God doesn't care anymore which is the lie the Devil wants us to believe. Like so many as I've shared before there's part of me that wants the whole plan, now, and wonders "God, what on earth is going on here?" But what I know is that even if the battle seems hard, God is with me in the fight, and will ultimately be with me to lead me home to heaven. I cant yet answer why this or that, and I know I'll have Good Fridays in my future and moments of pain. But in this, as I go before the altar and hold the bread and wine in my hands that become through the power of the Holy Spirit Jesus present, or when I gaze into the eyes of my dog and see love revealed in this beautiful animal God has created and blessed me with, or

when I gaze upon the beauty of nature, in so many ways God is saying to me “I love you” and that “I am with you.” Indeed the battle of life is a long one - but God is with us in the trenches as we see when we gaze upon the crucifix. May our hearts, minds and souls be opened to hearing His love, never falling for the lie that prayer is a waste of time, but knowing that with prayer we will find God. As Emily Dickinson wrote:

The thing with feathers,
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune without the words,
And never stops at all.

Through which men reach
Where presence is denied them
They fling their speech
By means of it in God’s ear…

And when we do that, God listens. Prayer, as she calls it, is the little implement lifting us to God. And this is a God who listens, who loves, and

is with us. May we never doubt that with God, we too will win the battle and the crown of eternal life.