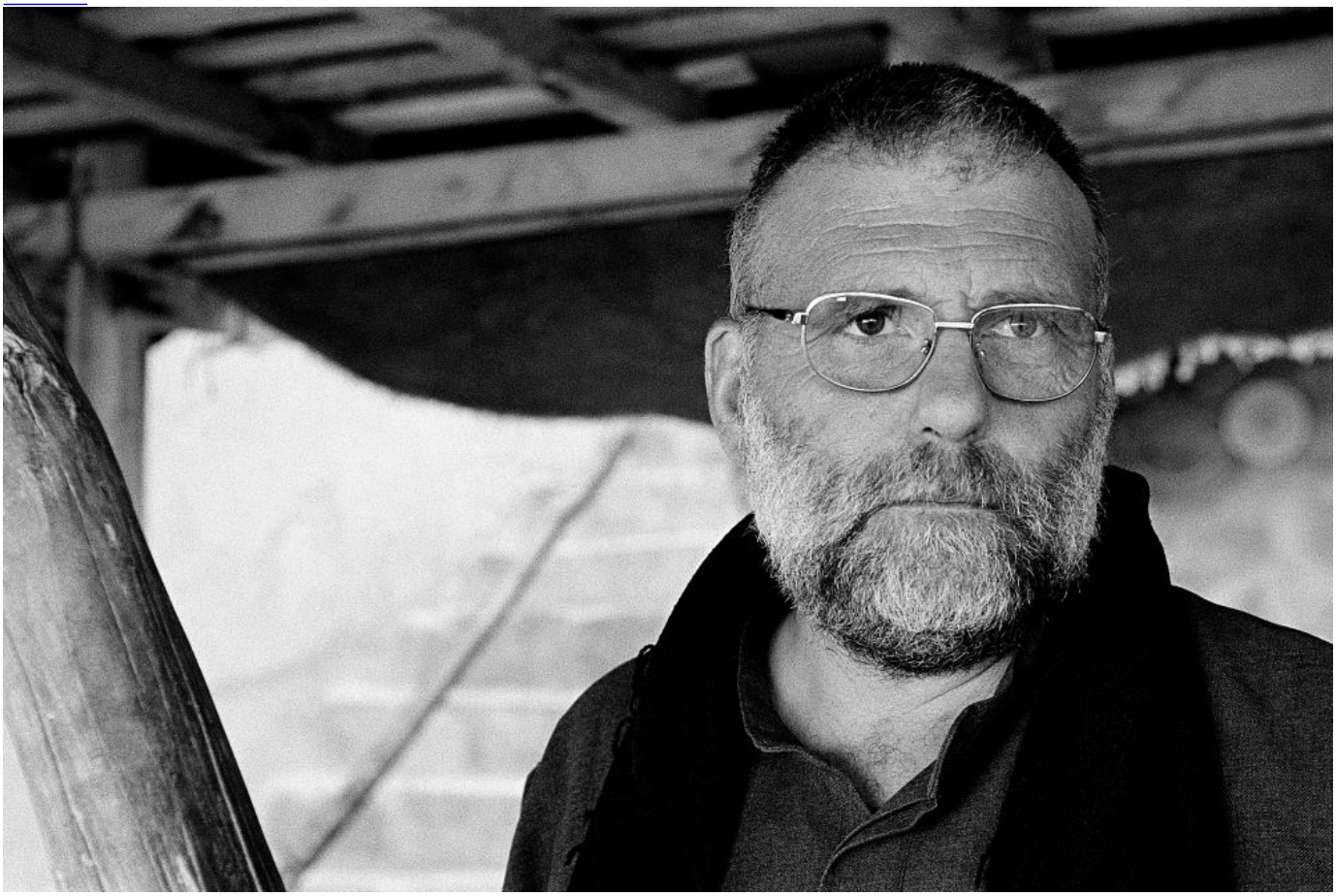
News



Jesuit Fr. Paolo Dall'Oglio stands at the Mar Musa monastic community in Syria in April 2008. On the morning of July 29, 2013, Dall'Oglio walked alone toward the headquarters of ISIS in the rebel-held city of Raqqa, Syria. He has not been seen since. (Courtesy of Riccardo Lorenzi)



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One morning 12 years ago this week, Italian Jesuit Fr. Paolo Dall'Oglio walked alone toward the headquarters of ISIS in the rebel-held city of Raqqa, Syria.

A local host had asked him why he would risk such a move. "I have to go to them because I am the bearer of a message from the Kurds," Dall'Oglio replied. Hours later, he was abducted.

He has not been seen since.

Dall'Oglio's disappearance on July 29, 2013 at age 59, came just days after he arrived in Raqqa from Turkey, defying warnings from friends and diplomats who feared for his safety. Dall'Oglio had been received warmly by many locals and was seen publicly saluting a crowd at a rally in support of the besieged city of Homs.

But activists said ISIS was angered by his outspoken criticism of violence against Kurdish residents in the nearby town of Tel al-Abyad. A Western diplomat later confirmed that Dall'Oglio had insisted on going anyway.

What happened to Dall'Oglio that July morning inside ISIS' Raqqa headquarters remains unknown. Despite rumors and speculation, it's unclear if the Jesuit priest is alive or dead.

Dall'Oglio is among many who have gone missing in Syria. According to the International Commission on Missing Persons, more than 130,000 people disappeared as a result of Syria's civil war that culminated with the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024.

American journalist Austin Tice disappeared in Syria in 2012 while reporting near Damascus and has not been seen since. Tice's is one of the longest unresolved cases of a foreigner missing in the Syrian conflict. Tice's mother, Debra, said in an interview with NCR that there are few clues despite multiple trips to Syria, where she lived side by side with local Catholics.

The U.S. State Department said the U.S. continues efforts to locate Austin Tice, but had no specific information about his whereabouts, Reuters reported in January.

Read this next: Austin Tice's mother speaks to NCR on faith and 12-year effort to find her son

For those who knew Dall'Oglio, his disappearance was the tragic continuation of a life defined by radical devotion to peace and interfaith dialogue.

For three decades starting in 1982, the priest lived in Syria and served at the ancient monastery of Mar Musa, which he restored by hand and transformed into a center for dialogue between Christians and Muslims.

Also known as the Monastery of St. Moses the Abyssinian, it's thought to date to the sixth century or earlier. It is 50 miles north of the Syrian capital, Damascus.

Read this next: An ancient revitalized monastery becomes hub of Christianity in Syria

The Assad regime expelled Dall'Oglio in 2012 for supporting victims of military crackdowns. Yet he continued to advocate for reconciliation among Syria's religious and ethnic communities, even as the civil war made such efforts increasingly dangerous.



Jesuit Fr. Paolo Dall'Oglio greets a Syrian neighbor close to the Mar Musa monastic community in Syria in 2006. Before he went missing July 29, 2013, he had become an outspoken supporter of the 2011 Syrian revolution against the Assad regime.(Courtesy of Archivio Saglietti)

For Francesca Dall'Oglio, an older sister who lives in Rome, the loss is not just of a priest or public figure, but of a brother who had always stood apart, even as a child.

"Paolo always needed to be recognized by our family," Francesca said in an interview with NCR. "He was a very sensitive person, emotionally as well, but also capable of profound reflection even as a child."

The fourth of nine siblings, Dall'Oglio grew up with an instinct toward dialogue, speaking with shepherds and workers, connecting deeply with people from all walks of life.

"When he talked to someone, he forgot everything else," Francesca said. "He had a very strong voice and always sang with his friends."



Jesuit Fr. Paolo Dall'Oglio and his sister Francesca Dall'Oglio at the Mar Musa monastic community in Syria in 2008.(Courtesy of Francesca Dall'Oglio)

When Francesca visited her brother at the ancient monastery of Mar Musa in Syria in 2008, she saw a man at peace. "Paolo found his path there; he was happy," she said.

But behind the quiet strength of Mar Musa, the ground was shifting.

In the years leading up to his disappearance, Dall'Oglio became an outspoken supporter of the 2011 Syrian revolution against the Assad regime. His writings for

the Italian Huffington Post and emails to family bore a tone of urgency and mission.

"My dear *Chicca*, I am sorry that you too have to bear the weight of my mission," he wrote in his last email to Francesca in July 2013.

"I was moved," she said. "It is a burden we bear, but I feel it with love, as something beautiful."

Tension also mounted within the family.

After Dall'Oglio vanished — reportedly taken by ISIS — his siblings were split on how to respond publicly. "Different views and positions have emerged, causing great division and suffering," Francesca said. "There was a part of us that wanted to spread Paolo's message, while others preferred not to talk about it."

Pope Francis meets the four sisters and three brothers of Jesuit Fr. Paolo Dall'Oglio.

Pope Francis meets the four sisters and three brothers of Jesuit Fr. Paolo Dall'Oglio, missing and presumed kidnapped in northern Syria since July 29, 2013. Francis met the family at the Jesuit headquarters in Rome, where they all joined the Jesuit community for lunch. (CNS/Courtesy of Infosj, Rome)

The Dall'Oglio family met Pope Francis twice.

"We gave him Paolo's book, *In Love with Islam, Believer in Jesus*," Francesca said. The pope promised to read it on his flight to Abu Dhabi in February 2019, where he signed a historic declaration on interfaith dialogue. He would then go on to make two public appeals for Dall'Oglio's release.

But the years since have been punctuated by rumors, false leads and speculation — none confirmed. "Paolo had to be silenced," Francesca believes. "The news of Paolo's death would have meant the spread of his message. He would have continued to be inconvenient for those in power."

Dall'Oglio's political voice rose with the 2011 Arab Spring.



Jesuit Fr. Paolo Dall'Oglio appears with fellow monks at the Mar Musa monastic community in Syria in 2002. Also known as the Monastery of St. Moses the Abyssinian, it's thought to date to the sixth century or earlier. It is 50 miles north of the Syrian capital, Damascus. (Courtesy of Archivio Saglietti)

Journalist and author Riccardo Cristiano met Dall'Oglio shortly after the priest was expelled from Syria in 2012. He had sent Dall'Oglio a manuscript about the Lebanese Arab Spring.

"If you want to help get me expelled from Syria, you've chosen the right path," Dall'Oglio immediately responded to him via email. "I can't write anything about it, but I'm very interested in what you've written."

The two men quickly became close.

"He became a life companion for me. He was a radically evangelical person, and evangelically rooted in reality," Cristiano said.

"Paolo interpreted the Arab Spring as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," said Cristiano, who founded the association Journalists Friends of Father Paolo Dall'Oglio after the priest disappeared.

Mar Musa, the heart of a Syrian community

Fr. Jihad Youssef remembers the night he first met Jesuit Fr. Paolo Dall'Oglio in 1996. Youssef, then 19, had come to the remote Syrian monastery of Mar Musa with a youth prayer group. Dall'Oglio stood out: tall, bearded, wearing a keffiyeh and an old hat, his finger bandaged from working with stone.

That night, under the stars, Youssef said he felt his vocation stir.

Youssef watched the ruins of Mar Musa come alive physically, as hospitality facilities rose from stone and sand, and spiritually, as a new kind of monastic community emerged.

"A sea of people with names, stories, sufferings, desires. The community grew around Paolo's charism to love Islam and Muslims by following Jesus' words of love," Youssef said in an interview.

When Dall'Oglio disappeared and the Syrian civil war erupted, the heart of the community was torn. Mar Musa fell silent, nearly hermitic, surrounded by war and distrust. Yet even as bombings shook the mountains, the monastery endured as "a lung that breathes and prays for peace," Youssef said.

Today, Youssef continues Dall'Oglio's mission with a group of seven monks and nuns, welcoming Christian and Muslim pilgrims for free from all over the world who seek peace, faith and a shared future.

"Paolo believed in the humanity of everyone," Youssef said. "Even of ISIS. But maybe there was no reciprocity."

Their relationship endured through Dall'Oglio's 2013 clandestine return to Iraq, then to Turkey, and finally to Raqqa, Syria. They last spoke by phone before his departure. Dall'Oglio was calm but urgent.

"It's clear that everything is about to blow up here," the priest said, as recalled by Cristiano. "The Kurds will be involved in the war with ISIS and Syria, and the whole region will be involved."

On July 29, 2013, Dall'Oglio entered ISIS-controlled Raqqa. He had not gone, Cristiano said, by accident or naivete.

"Paolo said in every possible venue in Raqqa that he would not leave until he was received by the leaders of ISIS," Cristiano said. "He was a leader of the people, hostile and an enemy of ISIS. He defended the Kurds from ISIS massacres."

Cristiano said he thinks Dall'Oglio went to negotiate a release — likely of Kurdish hostages — on behalf of communities who trusted him.

The Reuters report about the priest's disappearance said that on the evening of July 29 ISIS was "angered" by Dall'Oglio's criticism of their massacre of the Kurds. Since then, no one has claimed responsibility for the disappearance

"By not letting the bearer of this message return, they rejected it," Cristiano said. "They knew that Paolo was much loved by both the Islamic and Christian population, whom they had to conquer and keep under their control."

In the years since Dall'Oglio's disappearance, rumors have surged. "From 2013 to the present, there has been a succession of fake news or anonymous messages," Cristiano said. "I believe that these are manipulations compatible with the Syrian environment."

Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, director of the Holy See Press Office from 2006 to 2016, admired Dall'Oglio's challenging and original outreach to Islam, which was not always understood by local Christian communities.

"Paolo's quest is for religious dialogue rather than interreligious dialogue, in which we trace back together to the origin of our relationship with God," he said.

Lombardi recalled that Pope Francis celebrated Mass at the Chiesa del Gesù in Rome two days after the priest's disappearance. The following year, members of the Mar Musa community met Francis, Lombardi said, and gave Francis two small icons, one of which he kept in his private residence at Casa Santa Marta.

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Jesuit Fr. Arturo Sosa, the global head of the congregation, in a letter to Jesuits of the Near East and Maghreb Province, said he had hoped the end of the war would bring the truth about the missing priest.

"Sadly, that hope remains unfulfilled," Sosa wrote. "Like all true prophets, he was challenging, even unsettling, persecuted — and yet, he stood tall, whatever the cost, unwavering in his commitment to justice and truth."

When reports in June described a possible mass grave in Raqqa that might have contained Dall'Oglio's body, Francesca contacted the Syria Justice and Accountability Centre. They told her they had not gone to dig in that area yet, discounting the reports.

And while some Western institutions tried to help — notably the U.S. Department of State offered a $5 million reward for information — Cristiano said he remains skeptical.

Francesca said she doesn't want Dall'Oglio's case to be closed. "The real, documented truth must come out," she said.

"I am ready for the truth."