

Opinion

Cardinal Bertello: A rare voice at the verge of cataclysm

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Giuseppe Cardinal Bertello served as the Apostolic Nuncio (papal ambassador) to Rwanda from January 12, 1991, to March 1995. File

History repeatedly demonstrates that mass extermination is rarely the result of ignorance; it is the result of conscious inaction, moral blindness, and the normalization of sin. One name remains largely absent from dominant narratives of the Genocide Against the Tutsi, yet it warrants careful recognition and historical attention: Archbishop Giuseppe Bertello, today Cardinal Giuseppe Bertello of

the Roman Catholic Church.

His relative invisibility in public memory is not the consequence of moral hesitation, but of the form his intervention took. Bertello, an Italian national, did not issue public denunciations or pastoral letters; instead, he chose the most direct and perilous path available to him at the time — addressing power itself.

In November 1992, through a confidential communication conveyed by President Juvénal Habyarimana’s advisor, Bertello delivered a plain moral assessment of the MRND–CDR alliance, explicitly identifying its ideology and practices as oriented toward the extermination of the Tutsi population.

That this warning was issued privately has contributed to its absence in historical accounts, yet the importance of the message and the timing of its delivery render it all the more significant. Far from diminishing its importance, the discretion of Bertello’s intervention underscores the moral courage required to speak truth to power when truth itself had become dangerous.

His courage and witness, now viewed in retrospect, demands recognition not only as

a moment of clarity before catastrophe, but as a standard against which ecclesial responsibility in times of impending mass violence must be measured.

He spoke before the 1994 genocide, directly to the person holding supreme power: President Juvénal Habyarimana, through the trusted advisor. He used words that diplomats almost rarely dare to use: “extermination,” “satanic,” “excommunication.”

This article examines Bertello’s intervention as a moral and theological event, exploring the rare courage it represents, the failures of local ecclesiastical leadership, the moral calculus of the president, and the educational lessons humanity must learn to prevent similar catastrophes.

A warning memo

Some truths arrive softly, wrapped in diplomatic language, borne by men trained to speak cautiously. Others arrive like thunder, cracking the sky, leaving no shelter for excuses. On 14 November 1992, President Juvénal Habyarimana received such thunder — not from rumor, not from opposition propaganda, but from his own trusted adviser for External Affairs and Cooperation, Professor Runyinya Barabwiriza, reporting faithfully to his boss—on a meeting with the Apostolic Nuncio to Rwanda — Giuseppe Bertello.

“I was received in an audience by His Excellency Monsignor Giuseppe BERTELLO, Apostolic Nuncio to Rwanda, on Friday, 13 November 1992, at his residence.”

Professor Runyinya didn’t meet an ac-

tivist, a journalist or a dissident. This was the Pope’s personal envoy—the Vatican’s eyes and ears—reporting soberly, pastorally, and devastatingly, on what he was seeing in Rwanda.

According to Runyinya’s note to his boss, which I have a copy, Bertello began politely, even generously. He spoke of his previous postings in Benin and Togo, of his experience in West Africa, and of his satisfaction with his mission to Rwanda, “even though he considers it a context quite different from that of West Africa.” He dismissed the fashionable Francophone obsession with a Sovereign National Conference, judging it “not appropriate in Rwanda” and warning that, amid war and negotiations, it would become “a disruptive element.”

Then Runyinya reports about how the gloves came off. “The information held by the prelate regarding the MRND is largely unfavorable.” Runyinya, perhaps anticipating his president’s irritation, rushed to identify the alleged sources of this bad reputation: “This is essentially because he obtains it from Nuns and Priests who are mostly Tutsi, and therefore favorable to the aims of the Inkotanyi.”

By suggesting bias in Nuncio’s sources, it was as if truth itself had an ethnic quota. As if the Gospel changed meaning depending on the baptismal register.

But the Nuncio’s judgment did not come from whispers. It came from patterns, actions, and blood. And so Bertello said—clearly, explicitly, and without euphemism—that President Habyarimana was accused of: “organizing killings throughout the country, through his entourage, in order to remain

in power; being the designer and catalyst of the activities of the CDR to exterminate the Tutsi; and disrupting the progress of the Arusha peace negotiations in order to maintain the status quo of refugees.”

The statement “exterminate the Tutsi” appears here in 1992—over eighteen months before the genocide erupted.

Runyinya tried damage control: “I explained to the Apostolic Nuncio that President HABYARIMANA cannot be a double-faced man whose actions do not correspond to the philosophy expressed in the program of Unity, Peace, and Development of his party, the MRND.”

I beg your indulgence. Unity. Peace. Development. Three words were used by MRND, indistinguishable from satire or hypnotisms. The Nuncio listened. He “fully understood” the advocacy. Then he delivered the line that should have shaken State House to its foundations: “He regretted that no public rebuttal had ever been made against the overwhelming accusations of the opposition.” Silence, in Christian theology, is never neutral. It is either prudence — or complicity.

Then came the sentence in Runyinya’s memo that history must never fail to recall: “...someone warned him about the President’s Christian conduct, saying that President HABYARIMANA must choose between the Catholic Church and the CDR. Now that he has chosen the CDR (whose actions are not Catholic, that is, satanic), he must be excommunicated and leave the Assembly of Jesus.”

Prof. Runyinya closed with bureaucratic

disappointment: “In short, the MRND–CDR alliance and others are today badly interpreted.” Badly interpreted. As if extermination were a public-relations issue. As if the problem were perception rather than policy. As if what was needed was not repentance, rupture, and accountability—but messaging.

This is where systemic manipulation quietly enters the record. What followed in Runyinya’s note was a set of transition scenarios extending from late 1992, peacefully to elections at the end of 1993—a calendar of hope detached from reality, if not outright gaslighting.

These plans were presented as reasonable, orderly, inevitable proposals. Yet, they were largely a form of political theater intended to reassure the Apostolic Nuncio without acknowledging the deep-rooted extremist elements within the MRND–CDR alliance. The “transition plan” concealed the deeper reality: the alliance was consolidating its power, mobilizing militias, and preparing for genocide while maintaining the appearance of legality and order. The prelate was being managed.

In the memo, Runyinya correspondingly urged a campaign to improve the MRND’s image in ecclesiastical circles. Such campaigns, without reform or rejection of genocidal alliances, were PR, not repentance, concealment, not moral correction. The attempt to manipulate the Church illustrates the moral and ethical distortions that allowed genocide to become imaginable, tolerated, and eventually enacted.

The Nuncio warned again about Arusha: “One has everything to gain from peace,

whereas one loses everything with war.” He called it “trivial” to continue fighting merely to avoid a two-thirds vote in the Council of Ministers. He predicted elections the MRND “will certainly be able to dominate.” He was offering the regime an exit ramp.

A satanic alliance

The most challenging statement in Professor Runyinya Barabwiriza’s note was Bertello’s description of the MRND–CDR alliance as “satanic”: “...someone warned him about the President’s Christian conduct, saying that President HABYARIMANA must choose between the Catholic Church and the CDR. Now that he has chosen the CDR (whose actions are not Catholic, that is, satanic), he must be excommunicated and leave the Assembly of Jesus.”

Later in the same note, Runyinya emphasized what he, as advisor, believed should be “retained” from the meeting with the Nuncio. Among them was a call for the MRND to launch a large-scale information campaign to “cleanse” its image in ecclesiastical circles—to rebuild trust, to counter accusations, to reshape perception. But this was not moral reform. It was cosmetic purification. A campaign to launder a party’s reputation without dismantling its alliance with exterminationists is not reconciliation—it is the hiding of a crime behind language.

The Nuncio, still operating in good faith, believed that Catholic and Protestant Churches could help shepherd the transition to peace—imagining them as neutral medi-

ators anchored in the Gospel. He did not yet know — or perhaps did not want to easily believe — that some among them were already sympathetic to the perpetrators, already tolerant of genocidal ideology — and sliding from pastoral silence into moral betrayal. Some among the church hierarchy, did not merely fail to stop a satanic plan; they truly became its vicars or chaplains.

Later, church leaders who should have echoed Bertello — instead joined a “Contact Committee” that saw nothing wrong with the MRND–CDR alliance, nothing wrong with genocidal ideology, nothing wrong with inviting the architects of extermination into transitional institutions. The RPF objected. The bishops did not.

Until he left Rwanda on 10 April 1994, Bertello paid the price. He was vilified, harassed, and humiliated —soldiers throwing food scraps into his residence like offerings to contempt. And yet, to this day, no Catholic cleric convicted of participation in the genocide has been formally excommunicated.

History must record this without flinching: A papal envoy called genocide by its name before it happened. He called the ideology satanic while others called it politics. He warned the president directly — and was ignored.

As Professor Runyinya and others busied themselves hiding the smoke, the fire was already roaring. The inferno did not come without warning. It came after truth was spoken, documented, managed, manipulated — and dismissed. And that, perhaps, is the most damning sin of all.

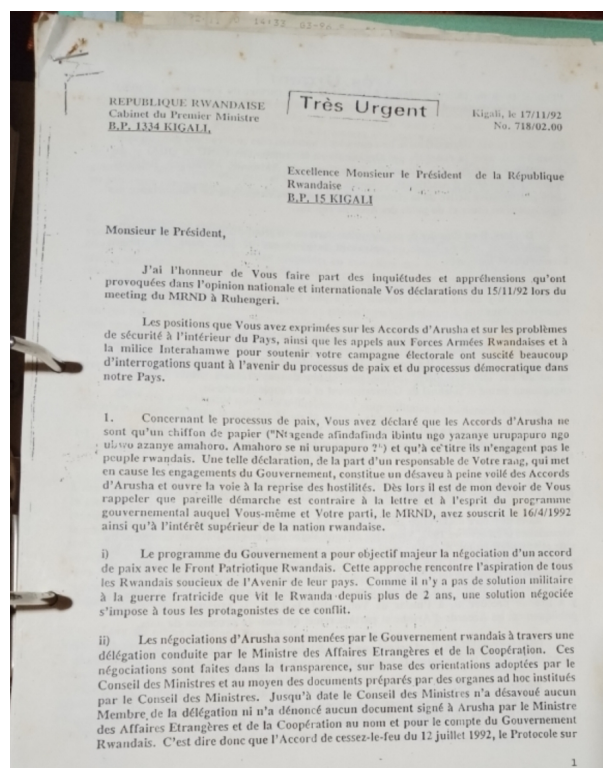
Judgement based on facts

The intervention of Apostolic Nuncio Giuseppe Bertello in Rwanda in November 1992 establishes one of the most articulate and morally consequential ecclesiastical assessments made prior to the Genocide Against the Tutsi. At a time when euphemism, denial, and procedural language dominated both political and religious discourse, Bertello articulated a judgment that was at once accurate, theological, and far-sighted.

What Bertello communicated to President Habyarimana was not a thoughtless judgment, nor the exaggeration of a foreign cleric unfamiliar with Rwanda's political and social texture. It was a timely, authoritative, and sober analysis grounded in observable facts, publicly available discourse, and a moral discernment that any focused and honest witness could have reached. Examples are there.

On 17 November, 1992 — Rwanda's Prime Minister, Dr. Dismas Nsengiyaremye wrote a letter to President Habyarimana confirming in detail most of the concerns raised by the Apostolic Nuncio. The letter is stamped "VERY URGENT" on all four pages. In this letter which is a direct response to among other things, Habyarimana's speech in Ruhengeri, two days earlier accused Habyarimana's government of "organized massacres" in Kibilira, Bugesera and Kibuye — also "genocide of the Bagogwe in the Prefectures of Gisenyi and Ruhengeri." Indeed, the stamp VERY URGENT was very crucial as of November 1992.

Nuncio Bertello used "extermination"



while Prime Minister Nsengiyaremye invoked a more legal term "GENOCIDE". None of them needed the approval of the UN Security Council or the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR). The two knew what they were talking about.

On November 14, 1992—Professor Jean Gualbert Rumiya, at the National University of Rwanda, and member of MRND's Central Committee, wrote a solid letter (which I have a copy) to President Juvénal Habyarimana resigning from the highest organ of the party and the party itself. Rumiya felt he could no longer be in a political family with an ever growing alliance with ultra-racist CDR.

Comme je Vous l'ai déjà demandé dans ma lettre du 22/9/92, il est grand temps, Monsieur le Président, de lever tous les blocages à l'exécution du Programme gouvernemental et que Votre parti et Vous-même apportiez plutôt une contribution positive au processus démocratique et au processus de paix.

2. S'agissant de certaines Autorités chargées des services de sécurité et de justice que vous avez comparées à des voleurs de bétail, il y a lieu de rappeler qu'effectivement certaines autorités se sont rendues coupables ou complices des actes d'insécurité et des crimes abominables dans l'exercice de leurs fonctions. A titre d'exemple, il y a lieu de relever les cas ci-après :

- i) Ceux qui ont organisé la mascarade de la nuit du 4 au 5 octobre 1990, ont semé la panique dans la ville de Kigali et sous le prétexte que les Inkotanyi étaient déjà infiltrés dans tout le pays, ont arrêté et emprisonné plus de 8.000 personnes innocentes.
- ii) Ceux qui ont organisé les massacres de Kibilira, du Bugesera et de Kibuye et ont procédé au génocide des Bagogwe en préfectures de Gisenyi et de Ruhengeri.
- iii) Ceux qui ont entraîné quelques militaires du Camp militaire de Kanombe dans une mutinerie injustifiée dans la nuit du 21 au 22 octobre 1992.
- iv) Ceux qui continuent à susciter des troubles à travers le pays sous prétexte d'antagonismes ethniques ou entre les partis politiques.

Demander au Ministère de la Justice, au Service des Renseignements de procéder à l'assainissement des services chargés du maintien de l'ordre et refuser par ailleurs le double langage et c'est freiner le processus de paix.

Très Urgent

distinguer suffisamment à temps les intérêts du pays et ceux d'un individu et contribuer réellement et positivement au retour à la paix intérieure et à nos frontières.

De plus, alors que le Gouvernement préconise la suppression des milices des partis, électoraux.

Faut-il rappeler que la campagne électorale n'est pas encore ouverte et que pareil comportement est contraire à la loi.

Quant aux Interahamwe, il a été maintes fois rappelé que cette jeunesse comprend des éléments armés et qu'à ce titre elle devrait être dissoute conformément à la loi sur les partis politiques au Rwanda.

Voilà, Excellence Monsieur le Président, quelques observations que j'avais à Vous faire pour Vous permettre de rectifier Vos déclarations de Ruhengeri pour les rendre conformes au programme gouvernemental et aux lois en vigueur au Rwanda.

Veuillez agréer, Monsieur le Président, l'expression de ma plus haute considération.

Dr. Dismas NSENGIYAREMYE
Premier Ministre

C.F.I.
Monsieur le Président du Conseil

What a coincidence! Prof. Rumiya and his three teenage children were killed during the genocide.

The Jeune Afrique interview of President Juvénal Habyarimana (N°1657, October 8–14, 1992) provides striking confirmation of Apostolic Nuncio Giuseppe Bertello's warnings that the president was an obstacle to the Arusha peace process and the return of refugees. Bertello had conveyed, through Prof. Runyinya Barabwiriza, that Habyarimana's personal calculations and the MRND–CDR alliance's policies were undermining negotiations and obstructing humanitarian reintegration. Habyarimana's own words underscore this assessment.

While professing optimism about dialogue, Habyarimana framed the conflict as an external problem: "Despite what has been said, we all know Uganda's responsibility, and more specifically President Museveni's, in this conflict. The people of the RPF still belong to the NRA". By characterizing the RPF as a

Ugandan instrument and the war as an invasion, he deflected accountability from his regime and depicted the civil war as a foreign imposition rather than a domestic crisis.

Habyarimana's treatment of Rwandan refugees for over three decades, further confirms his obstruction. He repeatedly referred to their reintegration in terms that separated them from the Rwandan population. He firmly believed the return of refugees and their resettlement will not be easy: "Social problems will arise. It is not possible to bring back refugees and give them land to farm. Rwanda has no free land. And it would be inhumane to bring back refugees who lived in camps in Uganda only to put them in other camps in Rwanda. The best solution is to integrate them into the population, because those who return inevitably have family and relatives still in the country."

By portraying refugees as outsiders, he effectively denied their rights to restitution and

land, reinforcing displacement and perpetuating the status quo. Habyarimana demonstrated a minimalist, controlling approach that delayed meaningful return and resettlement.

He also downplayed the substantive reforms demanded in Arusha: “But all of this is already in our Constitution and laws! Was it necessary to wage war to get here?” His dismissal of pluralist negotiation goals—the rule of law, political pluralism, democracy, and national unity—as largely redundant reflects his preference for maintaining MRND hegemony.

Habyarimana stated “rebuilding national unity” to be the “most difficult task”. Why? “God created us with three ethnicities. Under the single party, we tried to make everyone feel that they are first and foremost Rwandan...Some accuse us of having done nothing. But history will testify to what has been accomplished. Critics will perhaps point out that ethnicity is still indicated on identity cards. I claim that this is not the most important thing.” He said barefacedly. He was intrinsically divisive.

The emphasis on sovereignty, security, and procedural technicalities over reconciliation and political compromise illustrates precisely what Bertello identified: the head of state himself was an obstacle to peace.

In sum, the interview confirms Bertello’s prescience. Habyarimana’s externalization of the conflict, treatment of refugees as foreigners, and insistence on controlling their return, combined with resistance to political reforms, validate the Nuncio’s judgment that the president impeded both the peace process and the

restoration of national unity. Bertello’s private message was therefore neither alarmist nor rhetorical; it was a morally and politically accurate assessment of a leader obstructing reconciliation and human rights.

His qualification of the MRND–CDR alliance’s trajectory and pronouncements as pointing unmistakably toward the extermination of the Tutsi was not rhetorical excess. It was a precise naming of reality as it was unfolding before the eyes of the nation.

By the time Bertello issued his warning, the propaganda machine of the MRND–CDR alliance was neither subtle nor ambiguous. It operated openly, persistently, and with a chilling consistency that left little room for plausible deniability. Publications such as *Kangura*, *Médaille Nyiramacibiri*, *Ijambo*, *Interahamwe*, *Impanda*, *Kamarampaka*, and others constituted a steady stream of vitriol. Full of dehumanizing language, racial obsession, apocalyptic fear-mongering, and calls—explicit or thinly veiled—for violence against Tutsi as a group.

These were not fringe pamphlets circulating in obscure corners. They were widely read, discussed, quoted, and defended in political circles aligned with power. Their content was clear to anyone who cared to read rather than excuse. The Tutsi were depicted as an existential enemy, a contaminating presence, an internal threat whose very existence was framed as incompatible with the survival of the nation. Giuseppe Bertello, born before the end of World War II, grew up understanding the consequences of venomous speech.

The public pronouncements of the MRND-

CDR in rallies, press releases, and political gatherings removed any remaining ambiguity. Their language was unequivocal, their objectives transparent. They rejected compromise, denounced pluralism, and glorified exclusion and violence as patriotic duty.

Crucially, Rwandans knew—because political reality made it evident—that what the CDR articulated was not an independent or rogue voice. It echoed, amplified, and radicalized the unspoken but understood position of President Habyarimana and the MRND. The alliance functioned precisely so that extremism could be aired without formal presidential attribution, while remaining fully protected and politically useful. To pretend otherwise required deliberate blindness.

Alongside propaganda and rhetoric came preparation. Interahamwe training, organization, and rehearsals for mass violence were not secret operations known only to intelligence services. They were visible, discussed, and normalized. Young men were mobilized, trained, indoctrinated, and armed under the cover of party activism and civil defense. Roadblocks, lists, drills, and weapons distribution were part of everyday rumor and lived experience. The idea that this apparatus was merely symbolic or defensive collapses under the weight of its scale and its ideological framing. It was preparation for killing, and many knew it.

Within this context, Major General Déogratias Nsabimana's doctrinal message of 21 September 1992 to all military units—explicitly titled *Definition of the Enemy*—stands as one of the most damning confirmations of Bertello's assessment. The document

left no room for interpretive exercises.

The enemy number one was designated as the Tutsi, inside and outside Rwanda. This was not coded language. It was not a metaphor. It was doctrine. Written in French, it required no translation for the Apostolic Nuncio. Fluent in French, Bertello could read, understand, and evaluate it directly—as could any educated Rwandan leader, cleric, or intellectual. From that moment onward, claims of ignorance ceased to be credible.

That President Habyarimana was not prepared to accept the outcomes of the Arusha Peace negotiations was likewise not conjecture. It was confirmed by his own actions and words. The Nuncio's warning was vindicated almost immediately by the speech Habyarimana delivered in Ruhengeri, November 15—the day after receiving Professor Runyinya Barabwiriza's note.

The tone, content, and political signaling of that speech made clear that compromise was tactical, not embraced, and that extremist constituencies were being reassured rather than restrained.

The pattern repeated itself—exactly a week later, with Léon Mugesera's infamous speech at Kabaya, which gave genocidal ideology one of its most explicit and unforgettable articulations. These were not isolated incidents. They were part of a coherent escalation.

The reaction of Prof. Runyinya Barabwiriza—a Hutu-Power academic I observed for several months, moving swiftly to plan a campaign of cover-up, reframing, and political cleansing within the party—

was therefore predictable. When faced with ethical and moral exposure, regimes built on exclusion do not repent; they conceal, manipulate, and double down.

What demands deeper scrutiny, however, is not Runyinya's maneuvering, but the silence—or worse, accommodation—of institutions that claimed moral authority, particularly the Rwandan Episcopal Conference.

Thank you Bertello

Cardinal Bertello, while in Rwanda as Apostolic Nuncio, did not need mass graves to conclude that extermination was being prepared; the language of extermination, the doctrine of the enemy, the mobilization of militias, and the sanctification of hatred were already in place. In theological terms, sin had already become structural, ideological, and organized. To remain silent at that stage would have been to cooperate with it.

Rwandan Bishops and clergy were not external observers; how is it that they lived and ministered within communities where hate whose dioceses and parishes were precisely where propaganda circulated in mostly Kinyarwanda they spoke? Interahamwe and Impuzamugambi militias trained, and political extremism intensified, militias trained, and threats were uttered, were not publicly outraged by what was visibly and audibly happening among their own faithful?

How could the Apostolic Nuncio, with limited time in the country, see and name the evil with clarity, while those immersed in Rwandan society hesitated, equivocate, or re-

mained silent? Did they study a different theology from that learned and lived by Bertello? Were they guided by a Christianity emptied of prophetic courage and moral confrontation? Or was it a failure of discernment compounded by fear, proximity to power, and the temptation to preserve institutional comfort at the expense of truth?

These questions are unavoidable because the contrast is stark. Bertello's courage to speak plainly, to warn directly, and to name extermination as extermination was not merely remarkable; it was rare and costly. It placed him at odds with powerful actors and exposed him to political hostility. Yet it aligned him squarely with the deepest traditions of Christian witness: the refusal to baptize evil with euphemisms, the insistence that moral authority means nothing if it collapses when confronted by organized injustice.

Ultimately, the convergence of private warning and public evidence demonstrates that Apostolic Nuncio Giuseppe Bertello was not merely an observer but a prophetic voice in Rwanda's darkest period. His identification of Habyarimana as satanic and obstructionist, his insistence on moral and political accountability, and his recognition of the genocidal trajectory of MRND-CDR ideology are historically and ethically indispensable.

By validating these assessments through the president's own words and actions, we see how rare, principled, and courageous interventions can illuminate truth, confront evil, and provide guidance where silence or complicity prevails. History owes Bertello recognition, not for his visibility, but for his presence, moral courage, and steadfast com-

mitment to human life and justice.

In this sense, Bertello's intervention was not only historic. It was heroic. It stands as a measure against which the silence, delay, and moral accommodation of others must be honestly judged.

History has vindicated Bertello's assessment with tragic clarity. The extermination he named occurred. The war he warned against consumed the nation. The peace dismissed as naïve proved to be the only alternative to catastrophe. His witness stands as

evidence that another path was possible—one grounded in discernment, courage, and theological integrity.

Bertello's intervention should therefore be studied not as an anomaly but as a standard. It reveals what Christianity looks like when it refuses to be neutral in the face of organized evil. It also exposes the cost of silence, a cost paid not by institutions but by human lives. In this sense, his voice remains not only historically significant but urgently contemporary.