

Shameful silence of the Rwandan church

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A few months ago I asked a priest in Rwanda, a Tutsi, why the churches had failed so miserably during the 1994 genocide. Certainly there were courageous priests, as there were cowards and killers among the clergy. But the Roman Catholic and protestant church hierarchies remained virtually silent as about 800,000 Tutsis were murdered. When religious leaders did speak, their statements were so equivocal or misleading as to be seen by many Rwandans as an endorsement of the slaughter.

The Catholic church in particular failed because it claims four out of five Rwandans as adherents, yet it made little effort to influence the killers. That failure continues today through denial and evasion over its responsibility for the genocide.

The Tutsi priest I was talking to dug out an April 1972 document from a group of young Hutu priests pleading for their white archbishop and four Rwandan bishops to purge the church of Tutsi "domination". The

letter lauds the 1959 "revolution" in which the Hutu majority overthrew the Tutsi monarchy and power structure with the blessing of their Belgian colonial administrators. Thousands of Tutsis were murdered. Many more fled Rwanda. The priests deride Tutsis as counter-revolutionaries and "inyenzi" (cockroaches). They accuse Tutsi priests of failing to recognise the Hutu "victory".

"After the defeat of the counter-revolutionaries, the 'inyenzi', one would have thought that reasonable people, consecrated to God's service, would bow down before the irreversible reality of the victory of the people. Far from it, because they are still nurturing bitter regrets or still hoping for revenge," the letter says.

"The Hutu seems to have fallen asleep on the laurels of victory while the Tutsi is working very hard in order to again become master of events. How long can we allow our dear [Tutsi] brothers to make fools of us and to ignore us and the people from which

we are descended?"

The priests' language was the same as that used by the Hutu extremist politicians who ran Rwanda. The year after the letter was written the church endorsed the purge of Tutsis from education and the civil service by throwing them out of its schools. When the abuses grew worse, including periodic massacres, the church either looked away or focused its criticism on the individual killers, not the state, driving the policy. Two years later Rwanda's archbishop, Vincent Nsengiyumva, became a de facto member of the Hutu government as chairman of the ruling party's social affairs committee.

By the time the genocide took shape in the early 1990s, the Catholic church - along with protestant religious leaders - were too deeply embroiled and compromised to find its way back to moral ground. Eleven priests and religious leaders signed the letter the Tutsi priest had shown me. Some have since risen to positions of influence in Rwanda.

One is André Havugimana. In 1972 he was a young curate in Kigali. Today he carries a slew of titles inside the Catholic church. Havugimana is secretary of the Episcopal Conference in Kigali, director of the Catholic aid agency Caritas in Rwanda, and head of the Rwandan branch of the Legion of Mary, an Irish evangelical network.

If he had not forgotten the letter,

he certainly had buried it far in the past. The sight of the document left him silent. He just stared at this re-visitation. Eventually Havugimana said the letter was written in a spirit of "justice and charity".

Then why were Tutsis described as *inyenzi* - a word so frequently applied to the doomed by their murderers in 1994? "I admit that some people can get hurt by that, but that was the language of the day. At that time it could be understood in the context of the country's history, but, I admit, today you can't use words like that," he said.

I asked if he thought the letter's evident support for the philosophy of Hutu domination embraced by the church had not contributed to genocide. He thought not. "This document was written in the context of what existed then. If people misunderstood it at the time, it's sad. If people saw it as dividing the people it's very unfortunate. That's why you can't read this document now because it had a relevance at the time, not now."

For many in Rwanda, the church's behaviour now is little better than before the genocide. Few bishops or priests have grieved with the survivors, let alone apologised for the church's weakness. It took the pope two years to condemn priests who killed, and then he blamed the individual and not the institution.

When a Catholic bishop went on trial this week for genocide, the Vatican described it as an attack on the church despite the evidence against him. Augustin Misago, charged with dispatching children into the arms of the Hutu militia which led the killings, explained away the slaughter of unarmed Tutsis in one of his churches by saying they brought it on themselves by hiding guns.

In 1996, 24 priests, human rights activists and intellectuals sent a memorandum to the pope condemning the church's continued self-justification in Rwanda. "One is struck by the persistent wish to exonerate the hierarchy and the insti-

tution at any price. Our bishops appear to have thrown the responsibility of the Rwandan tragedy on to the shoulders of the faithful, while freely reserving for themselves the place of honour," it said.

But Havugimana still believes the church has little to apologise for. "I admit the church was silent in 1994 but I understand why. It was from fear for personal security. You could be taken as an enemy of the government. A few heroes risked their lives but it was not easy to do that," he said.

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