

Religion

Rwanda is proof that the Catholic Church isn't holy, but that it can be redeemed

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For the past two decades, Rwandans waited to see the Catholic Church live up to its calling and teachings of justice to genuinely seek out the truth around the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi. After more than two decades of approaching its responsibility with an ostrich attitude, the Church in 2017 appeared to have reluctantly undertaken a major shift in its position on the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi. Pope Francis officially asked for forgiveness for the “sins and failings of the Church and its members that had ultimately disfigured the face of Catholicism”.

Three years later, on 6 December 2020, the then newly minted Cardinal Antoine Kambanda, during his Thanksgiving Mass, unequivocally called upon the Catholic clergy to work together to comfort the Rwandan people. In an earlier interview

with Rwanda Television he had said that “the Cardinal honour is a recognition and appreciation of the pastoral work the Church does in the journey of reconciliation, as the Church also rebuilds itself.” Coming on the footsteps of the Pope’s pronouncement, this recognition of a damaged church felt like a message of humility after decades of obscene arrogance and insensitivity from the institution, which had heretofore acted then like it was beyond reproach. It was not.

But has the Church endeavored to reconcile itself with Rwandans before it seeks to bring about reconciliation amongst Rwandans? Doing so while still projecting an immaculate image of itself would amount to putting the cart before the horse, which would be presumptuous and premature on the part of the Church, and it would not help to heal the complicated si-

tuation between the Church and the Rwandan people. For one thing, far too many Rwandans had taken the Pope's statement of contrition as the art form of the 'celebrity apology' – not unlike Pope John Paul II who, in 2000, had, in a show of symbolism, asked God's (not Rwandans') forgiveness for all the sins and failings of the Church and its members. For another, the local Church's routine pastoral work is unlikely to carry any credibility until it proffers a more genuine apology that expressly admits to its errors and transgressions, in general, and its role in the genocide, in particular. It is this humility, honesty and clarity that will speak to the wounds and pain that the Church's wrongdoings, and at times outright criminality, has caused to Rwandans.

Credibility from repenting

The Catholic Church has been part of Rwanda's tragic history since colonisation, and remains a critical factor in shaping the future of Rwanda. The Church's contribution could be a positive or negative factor in this process. However, in much of the post-genocide journey of national healing and reconciliation, the Church has been walking a tightrope of portraying itself as a holy insti-

tution, and an unrepentant denier of the tragedy in which it was an active participant, on the other.

After the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi, the Catholic Church positioned itself as a conciliator of Rwandans. However, the fact that its clergy – priests and nuns – had either played an active or passive role in the genocide meant that the Church didn't have the credibility it needed for this role. Moreover, many of its priests and nuns evaded justice, mainly holed up in the safe havens of European catholic institutions where they had sought shelter.

This ugly past – and present – stands in the Church's way. It has, to a great extent, affected both its evangelisation work in general and whatever role it could play in the national reconciliation process in particular. The guilt had the church almost missing in action despite its potential in the reconciliation efforts. This suggests that the repentance of the Church is inextricably linked to the potential role it could play in shaping the future of the country – that's where its credibility lies. In other words, the ability of the Church to reconcile this contradiction – of accessory or accomplice to crime of genocide and source of comfort for victims – in the direction of national healing will determine the extent to which it reclaims its status as a moral actor deserving a leadership role in shaping

Rwanda's future. Only this will enable the Church to live up to its self-professed values and the only means of overcoming the perception of a living contradiction.

The origins of the contradictions

Clarity on the role of the Catholic Church in the genocide against the Tutsi has been problematic due to theological sophistry, ideological calamity and institutional ignominy.

The theological challenge was related to the absurd post-genocide defence – mainly denial – that the Church has had no role in historical atrocities because “the church does not sin, but its members do.” Accordingly, the Church sought to evade institutional accountability by dissociating the institution from the criminals within that institution, and abdicated responsibility for crimes it argued were “actions of a few” within the clergy. It is based on this flawed logic that the Church fraudulently claimed that as an institutional entity, the Church is not to blame for any crime in Rwanda or elsewhere.

This position was affirmed in 1996 by Pope John Paul II when he infamously stated that “the Church could not be held responsible for the guilt of its members that have acted against

the evangelic law in Rwanda.” Ironically, as an extension of this denialist claim, some clerics in Rwanda and in the Vatican cynically argued that the Church in Rwanda was in fact ‘one of the martyrs’ (or victims) of the 1994 genocide since some of its members were killed as well. It sought to ascribe onto itself victimhood without taking responsibility for its role of abetting perpetrators.

No one denies that Tutsi priests and nuns were killed. In fact, most were targeted by their colleagues. However, that is no defence against the complicity of the Church in the genocide. This complicity is principally located in its close ties with the post-colonial genocidal regimes for which it acted as a spiritual patron long before the former used the churches as sites of the massacre.

The second barrier against the Church's clarity on genocide and its claim of innocence is ideological. When the first missionaries set their foot on Rwandan soil in the early 1900s, the Church imagined the people it found to be of two distinct races : the Hamites and Negroids. The Belgian colonialists who came almost two decades later assumed this conception and began its application in their colonial policies and administrative practices. At the dawn of independence in the late 1950s, the Church and the colonial forces had come to a common understand-

ding that in the postcolonial order, democracy would constitute the liberation of Hutus from the oppressive Tutsi rule. This conception not only justified the 1959 violence against the Tutsi and subsequent killings without accountability, but it also made participation in the genocide a religious and democratic answer to the call to duty.

In the case of the Holocaust, historians have established that the Catholic Church did play a critical role, perhaps not in directly planning the genocide, but in normalising the genocide ideology and justifying the killings. Similarly, testimonies of how Hutu killers went to Church each day to pray, then went out to kill Tutsi illustrate the convergence of the ideology of the Church with the final “solution” to the Tutsi “problem”.

For many years after the genocide, this extremist ideology continued to fester in utterances and actions of some Catholic clergy in exile and in Western catholic institutions; it also informed post-genocide teachings that Christians don’t know when and how God judges and punishes his people.

This led to the push for Christian forgiveness – synonymous to amnesty and impunity – as a value considered more important than accountability and justice. Christian forgiveness was never linked to an honest broad examination of “sins and fai-

lings” to draw important lessons for the Church. It was a coin on which both sides had tails.

This is the intersection where Church and state meet. For decades, therefore, the Catholic Church internally practiced the divisive ideology it preached and helped to internalize negative ethnicity among its flock. For instance, the Catholic Church never opposed the discriminatory ethnic quotas imposed by the Habyarimana regime; instead, as the largest off-farm employer, the Church was exemplary in complying with those quotas in its institutions. Unsurprisingly, the Catholic Archbishop of Kigali was a member of the Central Committee of Habyarimana’s ruling party MRND.

Similarly, the clergy not only failed to condemn the genocide killings but played a major part in its rationalisation in the eyes of Christians. The former Catholic Bishop of Gikongoro, Augustin Misago, lamented incidents of overenthusiastic killings that at times misidentified Hutus as Tutsi, “ibintu byakomeye, abantu batangiye kwica batareba” (things are getting out of hand; people have started murdering those who are not expected to die), he said. Moreover, it is on record that the same Bishop called on Cardinal Etchegaray, a Vatican Envoy who visited Rwanda in June 1994, in the presence of other Rwandan bishops, to seriously consider and find a solution to the problem of the Tutsi cler-

gy because the Rwandan people apparently no longer wanted them as their priests.

If a Diocesan Bishop of the Catholic Church could imagine the Church of Rwanda without the Tutsi clergy, then imagine how widely the genocidal consensus had spread amongst Christians!

The truth will set the Church Free

From whichever ideological standpoint one adopts to interpret history, the role played by the Church in providing religious and “ethical” foundations for the colonial and post-independence ethnic policies, the practices of ethnic divisions by ecclesiastical clergy, the genocidal consensus at the institutional level and the Church’s vague remorse without full accountability constitute one of the greatest failures of Catholic evangelisation in Rwanda and Africa. It is an ecclesiastical tragedy. Perhaps the Church is reluctant to do what it must because there is no easy way to repent after directly and indirectly taking part in the genocide, and because the Church believes that it has the power to get away without having to do the right thing for the genocide survivors.

However, without reconciling the past crimes – euphemistically described as “sins and failings of the Church” – with a sincere desire to rebuild the Church’s moral character, the Church can forget being society’s spiritual leader. This historical clarity is a pre-requisite for the credibility the Church needs for the status it wishes to occupy : as a meaningful actor in the new direction the country takes.

The steps taken by the Pope and the Cardinal are in the right direction. However, they may be ineffective and unproductive unless the Church looks within for the Christian values of responsibility, repentance, and justice.

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