

# Kigali Journal; The Rock That Crumbled: The Church in Rwanda

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The vicious political and ethnic warfare that killed untold tens of thousands of Rwandans this spring and summer also shook the foundations of one of the country's most revered institutions : the Roman Catholic Church.

The church lost not only scores of priests and other religious workers, but also the confidence of many of the faithful whose families were hacked to death in churches and who believe that the church hierarchy betrayed them.

"The massacres have shaken many people's faith," said the Rev. Andre Bouillot, a Belgian Jesuit, who first came to Rwanda in 1966 and returned to Kigali in late September to preach at a church complex called the Christus Center.

"The church was not courageous enough to denounce the injustices," he said. "It was not conscious enough of its mission. It has social responsibilities. Now the church must rebuild Christian communities where so many have suffered enormously. Its main job will be one of consolation."

His message hits close to home. One of the first massacres in Rwanda took place in a small room at the Christus Center on April 7, barely an hour after the official announcement of the death of President Juvenal Ha-

byarimana in a plane crash. Seventeen Rwandan priests, seminarians and nuns were killed. The room and its bloodstained ceiling have been left untouched, except for the addition of a large wooden cross that leans against a wall.

The death of Mr. Habyarimana provoked massacres that renewed a civil war between the Hutu and Tutsi ethnic groups and spawned murderous rampages by Hutu militias.

Although many priests and nuns protected Tutsis from the militias, many Rwandans say their bishops and archbishops did not condemn the massacres quickly or forcefully enough and that they were too close to the Habyarimana Government, which helped to train the death squads. At least one priest has been arrested by the new Tutsi-dominated Government on charges of collaboration in the massacres.

That the war could have rocked the church and its adherents so deeply was no accident, observers for an organization called African Rights say. The killers clearly chose the church as a target in their drive to destroy Rwandan society, according to a recent report by the London-based African Rights, titled "Rwanda : Death, Despair and De-

fiance.”

The massacres killed the belief of many Rwandans – 60 percent of whom are Roman Catholic – that the church could offer protection. For the first time, priests and nuns were killed. The parishes, which ran schools, health centers and cooperatives, were almost all looted, their records destroyed.

“In countless interviews with African Rights, priests and nuns expressed anger and bitterness but never surprise at the failure of their leaders,” said the African Rights report. “The bitterness is especially directed at the Catholic Archbishop of Rwanda, Msgr. Vincent Nsengiyumva. His position and that of his senior colleagues assumed enormous importance as the killings were unleashed. The church pulpits provided the opportunity for reaching almost the entire population with the strong moral message that could have played an instrumental role in halting the genocide. They stayed silent.”

The Rev. Jean-Baptiste Rugegnamanzi, a Hutu priest temporarily in charge of the diocese of Kigali, said : “In a level of faith, this is horrible. This is a church that celebrates its 100 years of Christianity. I can’t explain it. The tragedy is that the horror of the massacres has surpassed the limits of the people’s belief.”

The Roman Catholic Church was brought to Rwanda a hundred years ago by white priests and has always been a dominant presence. The past months are full of accounts of heroic priests and nuns standing up to the killers. Of the Rwandan church leaders who were slain, Father Rugegnamanzi said, 94 were priests, 45 were missiona-

ries and 90 were nuns.

But like the rest of Rwanda, the church was often divided along ethnic lines, between Hutu and Tutsi. The hierarchy, in particular Archbishop Nsengiyumva of Kigali, a Hutu member until 1990 of the central committee of the governing party, had close ties to the Hutu Government of President Habyarimana.

The Archbishop, four other bishops and eight priests were killed on June 3 by renegade rebel soldiers. The new Government formed by the Tutsi rebels says it does not want the Catholic Church to be as powerful as before, and soldiers have harassed and even threatened to arrest priests who are too outspoken and independent.

At the Cathedral of St. Michel in Kigali, the Rev. Nicodeme Nayigiziki, a Tutsi priest who hid in Kigali during the war with his parishioners, preached forgiveness. But he admitted that he was still trying to learn how to practice forgiveness himself.

“I will try to ask God to teach me how to forgive,” Father Nayigiziki said. “There is so much work to be done in the church. One man told me that he would not enter churches where people had been killed. I answered, ‘You must then leave this land because many people have been killed in Rwanda.’ ”

Father Nayigiziki continued : “Maybe the church should have separated itself from politics. We saw what was happening. There were many signs. In the future maybe there will be fewer Christians but they will have a stronger faith.”