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The Mission of Rwanda and Burundi

by Juan Ávila, C.M.

Province of Colombia

Introduction

Because of the war which began in 1990 and ended in 1998, and of the double genocide which Rwanda suffered in those years, some bishops, many priests, religious and pastoral agents were killed and many others had to flee to different countries of Africa and Europe.

The Diocese of Ruhengeri, in northern Rwanda, was left without a bishop (he had fled together with the population, and his return was held up by the army and he disappeared) and with just five foreign priests and one Rwandan.

In 1997, the Administrator of the Diocese, Bishop Antonio Martínez, M.A., petitioned the Superior General of the Community to come to his aid, especially in the minor seminary in Nkumba and in a parish. Joined to this request was another from the Daughters of Charity of the Central African Region that a C.M. come to offer them spiritual assistance.

The Superior General, Fr. Robert Maloney, C.M., sent out a circular letter inviting the confreres to go to the missions *ad gentes*, among which was Rwanda; later he offered the Colombian Province the possibility of taking over this mission.

Fr. Aurelio Lodoño, Visitor of Colombia, visited the country together with Fr. Victor Bieler, C.M., Assistant General for the Missions. The report of this visit was presented to the Provincial Assembly which met at the end of 1997. At the time the petition was presented, the province's contract with the National Seminary in Cochabamba, Bolivia, where it had worked for 18 years, was ending. The Assembly received the petition with great enthusiasm. Fr. Gabriel Naranjo, C.M. was now the Visitor; he and his council named as missionaries Frs. José Antonio González, C.M., Luis Ariel Ramírez, C.M. and Juan Ávila, C.M. Their job would be to work in the Minor Seminary and in the parish of Busogo in Ruhengeri.

In March of 1998 the three missionaries left for Belgium where the confreres of that region received them with a warm welcome and sent them to study in the French Language Institute for missionaries.

The unstable situation in Rwanda persisted so that it was impossible to go there at that time. The visa for Belgium had also

expired. Meanwhile, on 27 June, Bishop Kizito Bahujimihigo was appointed as Bishop of Ruhengeri. It was impossible to get in touch with him. In the beginning it seemed possible to get as far as Nemba, where the Daughters of Charity had a house, but they had to leave it for security reasons. Then came the idea of going to Goma in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where the Daughters of Charity were taking care of refugees. But the Daughters also had to leave there. The Visitor of the Congo, Fr. Janusz Zwolinski, C.M., invited us to go to the Congo in order to open up the possibility of this province also working in Congo Brazzaville, but the offer was not accepted so as not to confuse the original intent of the mission. Finally the three confreres had to return to Colombia since the idea of reaching the Rwanda mission had failed.

A week after they had returned to Colombia, the Superior General sent a letter to the Visitor, Fr. Gabriel Naranjo, C.M., communicating the desire of the Regional Superior of the Daughters of Charity that a confrere go to collaborate in the formation of the Daughters of Charity. Fr. Naranjo named Fr. Juan Ávila who set out for France in November 1998.

1. A Brief Description of the two countries: Rwanda and Burundi

The two countries have a similar history. Each has three tribes: *Hutu* (the vast majority), *Tutsi* and *Batwa*. Even the languages of both places, Kinyarwanda and Kirundi, are very close. Some facts about the two countries:

1.1. Rwanda

The country is located in East Central Africa with an area of 26,338 square kilometers and a population of 8,000,000, with a density of 303 people per km². Rwanda is basically an agricultural country; the urban population is barely 6%. The official languages are Kinyarwanda, French and English. In the countryside only Kinyarwanda is known. The capital is Kigali which is in the center of the country and has a population of about 500,000. The next most important cities are Butare (a university city), Ruhengeri and Gisenyi.

Rwanda is known as “the country of a thousand hills.” Besides the volcanoes and mountain ranges in the north of the country, the greater part of its territory is crisscrossed by constant hills which get lower as they advance toward the south and east. The great majority of the people practice farming and the basic food crops are: beans, sweet potatoes, potatoes and corn. They also cultivate plantain and sorghum used in the making of the native beer and as part of

the daily diet. In some very limited areas tea and coffee are grown for export.

The salary for a farmer who works a full day is 300 Rwandan francs. In February 2004, the dollar was worth 595 francs and a euro was worth 640 francs. The educational level is rather low and the illiteracy rate is 45%. Added to this, and basically because of the war, studies were practically suspended from 1994 to 1998 so that those who were studying had to begin again at a more advanced age and some stopped studying altogether.

The government is a moderate dictatorship. In August 2003 democratic elections were held and the man already in power was elected with an overwhelming 95% majority. The reality we lived in certain areas of the country (except for the capital and a couple of important cities) was that there were no free elections. Everyone had to vote for the incumbent president for fear of being labeled a "divisionist." The vote was not secret, but rather guided by agents to obtain the desired result. But it should be recognized that, thanks to this president, there is a peace that, although imposed, allows the country to live tranquilly.

The people of Rwanda are very religious. More than 60% are Catholic; 25% are animists (the traditional religion); the rest of the population is divided between different churches and sects and Islam. The United States government supports the spread of the sects, just as it does in other parts of the Third World. There are nine dioceses and each one has a minor seminary. There is one national major seminary. The preparatory study is done in the Archdiocese of Kigali, philosophy in Kabgayi and theology in the Diocese of Butare. Vocations are abundant, and right now all the cycles of the Major Seminary are filled to capacity.

1.2. Burundi

The country is located in East Central Africa, southeast of Rwanda, with an area of 27,834 km² and a population of 6,500,000 giving it a density of 234 inhabitants per square kilometer. Burundi is basically agricultural; the urban population is barely 9%. The official languages are Kirundi and French. Only Kirundi is spoken in the countryside. The capital is Bujumbura, situated in the western part of the country near Lake Tanganyika, with a population of about 350,000 inhabitants. The next most important cities are Gitega and Ngozi.

Burundi is a mountainous country, but with fewer and lower hills than Rwanda. Like Rwanda, Burundi is principally agricultural with basically the same products as Rwanda, although the climate is better for fruit. The living conditions are more deficient than in

Rwanda, so that a farmer's income is only slightly more than half of what it is in Rwanda.

The educational level is quite low. Illiteracy is estimated at about 50%. The war, which began in 1993 and is just ending now, has exacerbated the educational situation. After many national and international peace efforts, ways to achieve it are just beginning to be seen. The guerillas have caused thousands of deaths (among them the Apostolic Nuncio, assassinated on 29 December 2003), causing the impoverishment of the people and forced migration towards the capital and the borders of the country. At this moment, only one guerrilla group refuses to enter into a peace dialogue.

The Burundi people are very religious. Fifty-five percent are Catholic, 25% practice the traditional religion and the rest belong to the different churches and sects and Islam. There are seven dioceses in Burundi and four of them have minor seminaries. There is also a national major seminary with a large number of seminarians.

2. The C.M. in Rwanda and Burundi

To the request of the Apostolic Administrator of Ruhengeri was added that of the Bishop of Musinga, Burundi, asking the C.M. to come and take charge of the parish of Ruzo, directed up until then by the Xaverians from Parma. On 7 December 1998 Fr. Juan Ávila, C.M., arrived in Rwanda to give spiritual assistance to the Daughters of Charity and to study the possibility of the Community's coming to work in Ruhengeri in Rwanda and in Musinga in Burundi.

The Daughters of Charity had already founded the Central African Region which comprises the countries of Rwanda and Burundi. And they had established, among other houses, those of Ruzo in Musinga and of Nemba in Ruhengeri. Their presence favored our going to these two places. After seeing the situation in the Ruzo parish and speaking with the bishop at that time, Jean Berckmans Ntere, it was agreed to accept this parish. To that end Fr. Rogelio Toro, C.M., was sent and arrived in Rwanda in August of 1999. After a few days of adaptation, he traveled to Ruzo to take charge of the parish. He was alone there for almost two months until Fr. Alirio de Jesús Ceballos, C.M., arrived to become part of the team.

The parish is small in extension and is made up of six "mission stations" which are located at an average distance of 15 minutes by vehicle from the parish center. The Xaverian Fathers were developing an interesting social promotion work with the support of the Daughters of Charity: water supply, a crafts center, goat raising, crops and housing construction. They were also constructing two beautiful chapels in two of the mission stations. Meanwhile, Fr. Ávila continued on in Rwanda, studying Kinyarwanda and helping in small

ways with the formation of the Daughters of Charity. The unstable conditions prevalent at that time did not allow traveling to any of the priest-less parishes in the Diocese of Ruhengeri.

In June of 1999, Fr. Ávila began his work in the parish in Nemba, although a permanent presence there was not advisable. The pastor was in Spain waiting to return when circumstances would permit it. In the parish there was an atmosphere of real spiritual hunger, because the lay people were caring for it and a priest could only come once in a while to celebrate the Eucharist. The parish is extensive. There are seven "mission stations" between 40 and 75 minutes by vehicle from the parish center.

On 16 October of the same year Fr. Orlando Yesit Fonseca, C.M., arrived in Rwanda to work in this parish. He came with Fr. Ceballos who was assigned to the parish in Ruza. Two days later the former pastor, Fr. José Cabayol, a *Fidei donum* priest from the diocese of Tarragona, arrived. We found a very interesting pastoral program, the fruit of the labors of the Missionaries of Africa (White Fathers). The lay people play an important role in the pastoral work. The parishes are subdivided into "centers" or "mission stations." In each place there is a good-sized chapel where the Sunday celebration is held. Many Catholics attend the celebration: the chapels are filled for the two or three Sunday celebrations. The lay people are the ones who normally preside at the Sunday celebration. We go to celebrate in these "stations" once or twice a month, but not always on Sunday. The purpose of our presence there is mainly to celebrate the sacraments of the Eucharist, Baptism, Reconciliation and Matrimony. Of course, we also use the occasion to visit the Basic Christian Communities, the Catholic Action Groups and some groups of poor or orphans.

Each "center" is subdivided into Basic Christian Communities, established by area and made up of no less than 15 nor more than 25 families. This is the base, so to speak, of Christian life in the parish, for it is there that the Christians are followed more closely, where they receive individual spiritual support and where decisions are made about the advisability of receiving the sacraments or helping a particular poor person. By way of example: the Nemba parish has 489 Basic Christian Communities. In each one there are four people in charge and 12 ministers dedicated to the care of the sick, the poor, the catechumens, those who have difficulties living the Christian faith, the liturgy, the music, etc.

On 9 January 2001 two other confreres arrived to form part of the team, Frs. William Alonso Marín Saldarriaga, C.M., and Julio César García, C.M. The former was assigned to Ruza and the latter to Nemba. On 1 May 2001 the Central African Region of the Daughters of Charity was made a province. Sr. Sabina Iragui, D.C., was named

the first Visitatrix and she took possession on the 31st of the same month. The naming of the Director took some time. Fr. Fenelón Castillo, C.M., was assigned and he came to Rwanda on 6 April 2002, becoming a member of the Nemba Community.

2.1. Vocations

Little by little young men interested in joining the C.M. began to present themselves. They are young men encouraged by the Daughters of Charity or by the Sisters of St. Vincent de Paul of Lendelen who work in the Dioceses of Ruhengeri or of Goma (Congo). We waited a while before beginning to give a positive response. Finally we made the decision to receive the first two: Jean Sauveur Cyiza and Emmanuel Imanahamwenatwe. They went through a long period of experiencing the community in the Nemba parish and were later (3 September 2001) sent to begin their formal formation in Cameroon where they did the preparatory instruction and the first year of philosophy. Our sincere thanks to our confreres in Cameroon for such fraternal welcome and assistance. Meanwhile, at the beginning of 2001 a new aspirant joined the community, Jean Pierre Kashori; a year later he was sent to do his Internal Seminary in Colombia. The petitions kept coming, and seeing this as the work of God, we consulted the province about the advisability of beginning a preparatory school in Rwanda.

On the occasion of the canonical visit of Fr. José Ignacio Fernández de Mendoza, the Vicar General, who was accompanied by Fr. Guillermo Campuzano, a Councillor of the Colombian Province, three important decisions were made: to petition that the mission become a Region, to continue the formation of our own candidates in Rwanda, and to take charge of the parish of Rwisabi in the diocese of Ngozi, Burundi. These three decisions were accepted by the General Council and our Provincial Council. But one problem remained unresolved: there were too few confreres to respond to the challenges. And so the work began on 27 September 2002 in the Nemba parish, in a house of the parish that the diocese of Ruhengeri graciously lent to us. It began with 12 young men: three from Burundi, two from the Congo and seven from Rwanda. Fr. Orlando Yesit Fonseca was appointed director.

The experience we have initiated should continue. At present we have in formation one man who just finished his pastoral year, seven in philosophy in the seminary in Kabgayi (one in second year and six in first), eight in the preparatory stage in Kabgayi. Two confreres are in charge of the house: the superior who is also the Director of the Daughters of Charity, and the Treasurer. They take charge of the classes in the preparatory school with the help of the parish priests and a professor of French.

3. Challenges

The Vocation Pastoral Program has become one of our great challenges. There are numerous vocations and, without our having to do any advertising, many candidates show up at our door. We do not have the capacity of knowing our aspirants well enough or even of visiting their families. There are very few formators, just two; and one of them has other important responsibilities to attend. The economic poverty of our candidates is striking. Moreover, their families completely wash their hands of their children once they have helped them to finish secondary school. They hope their children can help their parents and siblings.

And the problem of ongoing formation! One of them should begin his novitiate at the end of this year. Where? If it is in Rwanda, what would be best? With what formators? In which house? And then comes theology... and the same questions must be answered. Some African provinces have opened their doors to take in our candidates, and the perspective for studies and formation are very good. But we know all too well what these moves entail in terms of paper work, transportation, etc.

Our houses of formation need libraries! Here in Rwanda it is impossible to find the books our formation houses are demanding. Getting them from outside the country is beyond our means. Our economic resources are very limited. The parishes where we work can offer no economic support. In fact they cost us money, because none of them can sustain the priests that work there. All the parishes of Rwanda and Burundi must receive help from the diocese for the maintenance of the priests, and our Communities also have to help us in order to survive.

Thanks be to God we have received support from the General Curia and from our province and significant help from the General Council of the Daughters of Charity, and from the provinces of Salamanca and Zaragoza to whom we are very grateful. We can also count on the support of the Daughters of Charity of the Central African Province. Nevertheless the future is in no way assured. In our parishes the first challenge we have is learning the native language. Both languages, Kirundi and Kinyarwanda, are particularly difficult. Furthermore, the lack of personnel obliges us to start working full-time very quickly. But we are aware of the importance of learning the language and culture of the country, and each one makes real efforts to take advantage of the means we have at hand in order to respond to this challenge.

The number of missionaries is very small to respond on so many fronts. The province sent us reinforcements, Frs. Néstor Emilio Giraldo, C.M., and Félix Eduardo Osorio, C.M.; but just a few days before their arrival, Frs. Julio César García and Orlando Yesit

Fonseca had to return to Colombia. At the present time our personnel distribution is: Fr. Toro is working in the parish in Rwisabi; Frs. William Alonso Marín Saldarriaga and Félix Eduardo Osorio are in the Ruzo parish; Frs. Fenelón Castillo (who is the Director of the Daughters of Charity) and Alirio de Jesús Ceballos are in the Formation House in Kabgayi; Frs. Néstor Emilio Giraldo and Juan Ávila are in the parish in Nemba. Three confreres are already on their way to the mission and we expect their arrival around June of 2004. Our province continues to make efforts to send more men, but there are personnel limitations at home as well, and our disposition to go “everywhere” runs into the lack of personnel.

The lay people in our parishes are a real treasure. I have already mentioned this: the catechists and the heads of the Basic Christian Communities play a fundamental role in the life of the parish. But they need formation; and, fortunately, they have a real desire to receive it. The St. Vincent de Paul Society is well known in Rwanda and Burundi. Its members too ask us for formation. The Vincentian Marian Youth are just beginning and require particular attention. They are easy to be with; they are so receptive. But we cannot really give them what they ask for and need.

Our people's poverty is enormous. We are and we feel very close to the poor; in general they receive us well. But we lack the means to respond effectively to what they ask of us. The C.M. offers the means to apply for grants, but we ourselves need formation in this area. And besides that, each of us is immersed in the immediate and urgent tasks that formation and the parishes require. Without doubt, there is in each one of us great confidence that we are doing God's work. He is with us; he never fails. For example, there is the economic aid already mentioned, the donation of books from the provinces of France, the reception given us by the Diocese of Kabgayi so that our philosophy students could study there, and the fact that they have lent us, at no cost and indefinitely, a house where our House of Formation is operating.

We need the prayers, the nearness and the solidarity of our Vincentian Family. We know we are not alone even though the distance feels like a great weight sometimes. The Province of Colombia is present here and most assuredly many confreres will come to share the charism of St. Vincent de Paul in the midst of our brothers and sisters in Burundi and Rwanda.

(JOSEPH CUMMINS, C.M., translator)