

Brooke VanHecke

Journal Entry

7/16

Nyamata Church Site

Prior to our trip, we had been warned and cautioned of the reality and horror we would encounter at memorial sites. No amount of warning could have explained the raw and shocking experience at our first memorial sites. Our first stop was at the Nyamata memorial site. This was one of the hundreds of churches throughout the country that failed to provide safety and refuge for the thousands of victims of the genocides. As we walked through rusted iron gates, the bars were still damaged by the grenades, which provided an unsettling welcome to the memorial. Walking through the war-torn doors, I couldn't help but gasp at the scene. The piles of clothes within this small church littered each pew. I looked down, and had to look away when I saw a tiny red onesie riddled with bullet holes. The memorial was dark, dusty, and felt almost frozen in time. There were belongings of victims on the altar: rosaries, ID cards, pictures of loved ones, and many other possessions left behind. As we descended into the basement of the church, I learned quite quickly the telltale signs of death in this genocide. Lined up, organized in rows, were the skulls of victims within the church. Seeing cracked skulls, bones, and teeth made the genocide seem more real. I could tell if the person had been killed by machete, club, bullet, or grenade. The care of the remains of the victims made me think of those who had to care for the dead after. Those who had to undress the dead, clean the remains, carefully categorize and find the families of the deceased. The process is mind-boggling. I am unaccustomed to viewing bones and skulls of the dead, especially in the coffins when guards lift the lids to show the hundreds of bones in one coffin. But death is viewed so differently here. The grief process is not the same. Proper burials were rare during and after the genocide. The bones and skulls that seem so morbid to me are what provide witness and evidence to the genocide for the Rwandese.

After our official tour, we had free time to walk around the memorial site for meditation. I chose to walk back into the church. I stood alone, taking in the scene that seemed so foreign to me. When I looked towards the altar, I noticed a statue of Mary that I had never noticed before. I asked a guide passing by if she was added after the massacre. The guide responded, "No, she is one of the few that survived." I was breathless up until that point, although I was overcome with sadness while in the memorial. I had not been drawn to tears until that moment. I was overcome

with the sheer power I felt in that moment. As I stared up at Mary, I was shocked how bullet holes and shrapnel in the bricks surrounded her, but her statue was left unscathed. I had seen this statue before. She is clothed in white with a blue shawl and a white rosary decorating her neck, her face bowed in reverent prayer. But she looked different today in this scene, this light, and this place. She had blood splatter on her cheek, and her eyes seemed more grief stricken than reverent. It was almost as if she had seen the atrocity unfold, and was now entrusted to mourn for the victims from here forward. All I could think when I was standing before her was, "Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death."