

The Catholic Church, the Rwandan Genocide, and Reconciliation

In the Roman Catholic tradition, reconciliation is one of the seven sacraments. It is a doorway to the sacred where believers ask God for forgiveness and receive the healing grace of Jesus through absolution. Forgiveness and love are at the center of this sacrament and are at the heart of the Catholic faith. This focus on love and forgiveness is what creates a disturbing paradox as we analyze the Catholic Church's role in the genocide against the Tutsis. The Catholic Church was the only religious institution present for the entire scope of the genocide, including developing the early 20th-century ideological framework that established ethnic divisions between the Rwandan people. Catholic churches were the sites of many massacres during the genocide. There are countless stories of Church officials who actively participated in the killings. How can people of faith participate in such horrific events? If the sacrament of reconciliation provides an individual path for forgiveness, what is the path for institutional forgiveness? This is a question that the people of Rwanda and the Catholic Church have been struggling with over the past twenty years. It is not easily answered, but recent developments have provided hope in the process of reconciliation.

The Role of the Catholic Church Before the 1994 Genocide

When we begin to answer the question about institutional reconciliation, we must look at how the Catholic Church participated in developing and cultivating ethnic

ideologies. Before the colonial period (1897) and before Catholic missionaries arrived, the people of Rwanda did not divide themselves along ethnic lines. In fact, the terms *Hutu*, *Tutsi*, and *Twa* were social/economic classifications referring to whether a person was part of a herding (Tutsi), agricultural (Hutu), or hunting community (Twa). The people of Rwanda spoke the same language and organized themselves by clans. As the German colonists and Catholic missionaries arrived, they needed a system that supported their governance and superiority over the people of Rwanda. Using these existing social groups, the colonists/missionaries propagated the idea that each of these groups was ethnically distinct, with the smaller Tutsi group being intellectually and physically superior to the larger Hutu group. When Belgian colonists established power after World War I, the Catholic Church aligned itself with the government. This was easier since Belgium was a majority Catholic country and the previous German colonists were Protestant). In the 1930's, Catholic missionaries used their influence and power to help secure the banishment of the King of Rwanda, Yuhi Musinga, for the simple reason that he refused to be converted to Christianity.

In 1943, when King Mutara III Rudahigwa was baptized, there was a wave of conversions. This was not necessarily because of profound faith experiences of the people, but because of the zeal of the missionaries. Think quantity over quality. The king's baptism was based on advice from Bishop Leon Classe, advisor of the Belgian colonial administration. As a result of these conversions, there were now geographical centers to disseminate Christianity and a large increase in Church personnel. In 1946, the king truly enabled the Belgian colonists to reshape Rwandan society to European

and Roman Catholic values when he officially “consecrated the country of Rwanda to Christ.”

With the end of WWII, there was a push to end colonial regimes around the world. The leaders in the Catholic Church took notice and began to align themselves with the Hutu majority instead of the Tutsi minority. They anticipated a change in leadership and were well established as advisors to the first Hutu leaders when Rwanda gained independence in 1962. Instead of an independence for all people of Rwanda, the government kept the strategy of ethnic divisions and developed a Hutu ideology that supported Hutu superiority. The Catholic Church was integral in shaping Hutu-centric curriculum in the schools and forming people’s beliefs about ethnic identity from the pulpit. Religious language (by publishers, not the Church) was used to spread hate.

The Hutu Ten Commandments are a prime example of anti-Tutsi propaganda. These “commandments” were published in a Rwandan newspaper in 1990 and outlined Hutu responsibilities for maintaining power at the expense of the Tutsi minority. 98% of the country identified as Catholic, yet quotas were put into place in the seminaries so that 96% of men studying to become priests were Hutu. This is especially interesting when pondering the question of *why did so many men and women religious (either by commission or omission) participate in the genocide?*

A particularly influential Catholic leader during the first and second republics was Archbishop Perraudin. He served as the Archbishop of Kigali and focused on the divide between Hutus and Tutsi, most publicly and notably in his Lenten letters which were read in all Catholic churches:

After the defeat of the counter-revolutionaries, the 'Inyenzi' (cockroaches), 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 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 whom we are descended?"

In Rwanda, the Roman Catholic Church, as an institution, made decisions that codified the Hutu ideology into a belief system with tragic results.

Voices of Dissent

There were others in Rwanda, not the power base of the Catholic Church and Hutu regime, but priests and bishops who spoke out against these false ideologies and creeds. They aimed to deliver the country from the evil that was being created by the propaganda taught in the schools, churches, and systems. Bishop Aloys Bigirimwami wrote a pastoral letter in 1959 in exasperation after watching the people he served resort to racism and violence:

"The worst disaster for Rwanda was that the proponents of the acts of stupidity, were not pagans, nor notorious apostates who have abandoned Christianity, but rather Christians who were illustrious, as good elements among others. These Christians who incite others to evil, who preach hatred in Rwanda, they never miss Mass on Sunday, and worse still, they do not fear to

receive communion often. This is the worst disaster in our country and in our church. These Christians discredit us in front of pagans and members of other religions."

In 1960, he was even more focused in his direct message to the Church leaders:

"Fellow Rwandans, priests and the religious... and you the missionaries... Let us fight wickedness and hatred because they will sink Rwanda and weaken the Church. Evil and hatred continue to increase; it is said that a Muhutu cannot live with a Mututsi, that he must no longer be the teacher of his child at school, that they can no longer meet, share, trade, buy from each other, be in solidarity. This disaster that has befallen us, ward it off through the God of Rwanda, conquer it through the Gospel of love, truth and justice..... Let us strengthen the links of unity... if we do not succeed at home, we will have nothing else to do except to sink into the sea with a stone hanging around our necks..."

In 1990, five priests from the Nyundo diocese wrote a letter to their bishop denouncing the racist quota policy saying it was high time "the Church of Jesus Christ established in Rwanda proclaimed aloud and tirelessly" to denounce it, since it constituted "an aberration" within their Church. Three of the five were murdered with their congregations during the genocide.

April 6-July 4, 1994

Despite the Church's role in professing the Hutu ideology, the people in Rwanda found comfort in their faith. They came to their parishes for worship, celebrations, comfort, community, and safety. Hutus and Tutsis sat next to one another in church. So when the Interhamwe and local militias began killing Tutsis on April 6, 1994, people naturally sought refuge in the churches. There were many brave priests and nuns who hid people in churches, rectories, and convents. Hundreds of religious men and women died with the people they served. A Hutu priest, Fr. Celestin Hakizimana from the St. Paul Pastoral Center, bribed militia men who tried to break in. He wore his robes to intimidate people. Fr. Celestin is believed to have saved more than 1,500 lives. In the town of Ginsenyi, a Hutu nun, Felicitee Niyitegeka, tried to hide dozens of Tutsis at her church. She chose to die standing in front of the people she loved instead of stepping aside to be spared.

Despite the efforts of these men and women, and perhaps beyond our comprehension, there were other members of the Catholic Church who participated fully in the genocide. There was Father Serembo, who ordered bulldozers to push down the walls of his parish killing the 2,000 people inside. There were the Sisters Gertrude and Maria who led the Interhamwe to kill the women and children hiding in their convent and garage. Eye witnesses stated that Sr. Maria used banana leaves to fan the flames as the garage housing 500 people burned to the ground. Although these particular men and women were prosecuted, there were many other priests and nuns who fled the country and are still practicing in Italy, France and Belgium.

How Does the Church Reconcile?

In the aftermath of the genocide, individuals in parishes rebuilt and began to heal. The Rwandan government worked to develop a system-wide program of reconciliation through the justice system, educational system, and social programs. People were asking for a response from the Catholic Church. Yet the Church, as an institution, remained silent. When there was finally a message from Church officials in March of 1996, Pope John Paul II wrote the Rwandan people:

“The Church... cannot be held responsible for the guilt of its members that have acted against the evangelic law; they will be called to render account of their own actions. All Church members that have sinned during the genocide must have the courage to assume the consequences of their deeds they have done against God and fellow men.”

The government of Rwanda and individual Catholics in the country were unsatisfied with the response from the Church and demanded an institutional apology. In response, some international Catholic organizations, like the French *Aide à l'Église en Détresse* (AED), actually went so far as to list Rwanda as a country where the Catholic Church was under persecution.

In 2007, Pope Benedict wrote a letter to Rwandan President Paul Kagame recognizing the national day of mourning on April 7. This happened to be the same day as Holy Saturday. This letter was not an apology. Instead, the letter allowed churches to celebrate Easter sacraments on another day so as to keep the 7th as a day to remember the genocide.

On November 20, 2016, nine bishops of Rwanda wrote a letter apologizing for the Church's role in the genocide. This letter was meant to be read in all parishes in the country at the close of the Jubilee Year of Mercy which Pope Francis had declared in fall of 2015. The bishops wrote:

"Forgive us for the crime of hate in the country to the extent of also hating our colleagues because of their ethnicity. We didn't show that we are one family but instead killed each other."

The following week, President Kagame's Office issued the following statement:

STATEMENT ON THE MESSAGE OF RWANDAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS

KIGALI, 23 November 2016

The Government of Rwanda notes the recent initiative of Rwanda's nine Catholic bishops to apologise, in a general manner, for some of the acts committed by some members of the Catholic Church during the Genocide against the Tutsi.

This step is welcome, as individual expressions of remorse. However, its profound inadequacy only serves to highlight how far the Catholic Church still remains from a full and honest reckoning with its moral and legal responsibilities.

First, as they apologise on behalf of a few unnamed individuals, the bishops appear to take the extraordinary step of exonerating the Catholic Church as a whole for any culpability in connection with the Genocide.

Everything in the historical record contradicts this divisive claim. Second, it is regrettable that some priests apparently declined to read the bishops' message to parishioners as intended, thus disassociating themselves from even this mild expression of regret. Finally, given the scale of the crimes, there is ample justification for an apology from the Vatican, as has occurred repeatedly with other cases of lesser magnitude.

The Government of Rwanda commends the bishops' points on the importance of combating genocide ideology, and will continue to engage in an open and frank dialogue with Church leaders with a view towards encouraging the Catholic Church to face up to its own past without excuses or fear, just as Rwandans themselves have been doing over the past twenty-two years.

On March 19, 2017, President Kagame had an audience with Pope Francis. Pope Francis begged forgiveness for the sins and failings of the Church and its members and told President Kagame he hoped his apology would help the country heal. Pope Francis talked about his profound sadness at the Church's role. Kagame saw this as an important step in healing, but still asked for an institutional approach to reconciliation in the Church by actively stopping divisive language by some Catholic clergy and excommunicating members of the Church who participated in the genocide.

What does this narrative teach us about the Catholic Church, the Rwandan genocide, and reconciliation? How does the Church apologize for its role in a system of

oppression and hate in a way that heals on an intra-personal, inter-personal, and institutional level? Where is the line between individual responsibility and institutional responsibility? The story of the Church in Rwanda demonstrates how power and dogma can corrupt a message of love and forgiveness. Some Church leaders cultivated an ideology of hate. In the aftermath of the genocide, the Church has a choice in how it would respond. Instead of following the model of truth and reconciliation commissions as outlined by the UN, the Church responded from a place of fear. Instead of recognizing its role as an institution, it focused strictly on the choices individuals made during the genocide. This fear prevents true reconciliation for the Church and the people affected by the genocide. However, with Pope Francis's recent plea for forgiveness and Church leaders using the models of the reconciliation set forth by the Rwandan government, there is hope that the institution of the Church will be able to reconcile with the people it serves.

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