

The Peace Dialogue

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Twenty years after the genocide in Rwanda: what can we look back to?

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Commeration of 20th Anniversary of Rwandan Genocide at St. Louis University, USA

In the last two decades, whenever there is a mention of Rwanda, it has been synonymous with Genocide. It is only recently that alternative positive descriptions, such as Rwanda having the cleanest city (Kigali) in Africa and being home to the famous mountain gorillas have come to the forefront.

The genocide against the Tutsis was not just an accident. It has a historic perspective. Specialists disagree on the distinctions made between the Hutu, Tutsi, and the Twa who linguistically, culturally, and harmoniously lived side by side for hundreds of years. No society is perfect, but one can trace the emergence of negative ethnicity amongst the groups with the arrival from the 19th century of race-conscious Europeans. The Belgians pitted the Tutsis (whom they favoured and put in leadership) against the Hutus.

The years before independence in 1962, were however, marked by violent killings of Tutsis. The departing colonial authorities reversed their position and handed power to the Hutus. Prior and soon after 1962, a catholic-educated Hutu elite mobilized the masses and this led to a Hutu Revolution that saw tens of thousands of Tutsis killed and thousands sought refuge in the neighboring countries. The subsequent regimes reinforced the Hutu-Tutsis divide and this later culminated into the 1994 genocide against the Tutsis. Close to a million Tutsis lost their lives, including my parents and relatives. The country was in ruin! Dead bodies were all over. Demolished houses characterized every hill. Widows and orphans were innumerable. The genocide, regardless of their ethnic identity, affected every Rwandese. Prisons were filled with genocide perpetrators. In villages, people lived with suspicion. Those who had survived were not sure whether they would wake up alive the next day. Some armed groups formed in the neighboring Democratic Republic of Congo. They often infiltrated the country and killed anyone who refused to join and support them. Rwandese asked, "Where has the God of Rwanda gone?" (*Mana y'u Rwanda wagiye he?*) "Will the Sun shine on Rwanda again?" (*Ese izuba rizongera kuva mu Rwanda?*) Twenty years later, what would be the answer to these questions? Is there anything that Rwandese can look back to, and as we look forward, what should our focus be?

In Rwanda's journey of healing and reconciliation, we have set-up memorial sites in every district of the country. These sites are not only places of memory of what happened, but also a call to the global community that genocides should never happen again. The sites are a reminder of the sanctity of life and that humanity is one irrespective of our numerous identities. Still on the healing journey, the role of women in Rwanda has been very positive. Their skills and ability in reconciliation efforts through the *Gacaca* traditional courts had been instrumental in creating and promoting dialogue amongst neighbors. This has led to truth telling of what happened during the genocide. While searching for my dead family members, I only came to know that they had been thrown into a pit latrine through the help of women who were our neighbours. While *Gacaca* courts were not perfect, they have contributed to the reconciliation process and reduced the incalculable people who were languishing in poorly resourced prisons. Some countries have started trusting Rwanda's legal

system to judge genocide suspects, some of whom have been flown back to the country. It is also worth noting that women form 56.3% of the national legislature. This is higher than any other country.

Rwanda's long-term development goals are part of its Vision 2020 that seeks to transform Rwanda from a low-income agriculture-save economy to a knowledge-based, service-oriented economy by 2020. There is significant progress that includes high growth and rapid poverty reduction. Between 2001 and 2012, real GDP growth averaged 8.1% per annum. The poverty rate dropped from 49% in 2001 to 45% in 2011". Recently, the country was named "top performer in the *Rwanda Doing Business 2014 Report*, among the ten most improved economies in 2013 and Rwanda is now ranked as the second easiest place to do business in Sub-Saharan Africa" (World Bank, March 6, 2014). The Rwandan *Imihigo*, oaths vowed by leaders to achieve goals within a limited period, have contributed to this tremendous change.

Prior to 1994, ethnic and regional quotas in education determined entry into high schools as well as tertiary institutions. Students were classified along ethnic groups and preference was given to a certain scrutiny. This became a method to ensure the development of the future elite. While post-genocide education could still do better especially in quality, the biggest achievement has been the abolition of regional or ethnic identification of students and teachers. In some of our heroes, we count the beloved children of Nyange High School, killed by *Interahamwe* militia in March 1997 when they refused to divide themselves along ethnic lines. The sacrifice made by these students continues to inspire many in the country. The One-laptop per child program has also changed the face of information technology among young people and Rwandese are now aware that to become a modern center of IT and finance, science and technology are not an option. At the tertiary level, Rwanda has moved from one national university in 1994 to more than ten private universities in 2014. This has tremendously changed the minds of Rwanda.

Rwanda's vision 2020 is to have not only a safe place to invest in but also a clean place to live in. Rwandese people know that image matters in economic development (Foreign Policy, 2012). The spotlessness of Kigali has pushed leaders to strive for financial accountability to their donors. The mayor of Kigali puts it well: "we want to be clean in everything", Fidèle Ndayisaba said. "To have people clean in mind, clean just for sanitation, and ... investors get clean money too." It is hard to see any street with sewage; even the non-tarmacked roads are clean. Families are environmentally encouraged to plant trees in their property. The Rwandan *Umuganda*, monthly community cleaning practice, is an achievement to highlight in the last twenty years.

Almost all Rwandese now have health insurance that guarantees easy access to primary health care. Remarkable progress in the fight against malaria and infant mortality has taken place through the increase of dispensaries in every sector and the use of medicated mosquito nets in homes. Miles of fiber-optic cable throughout the country is in place and this has increased access to the Internet facility.

Despite these achievements, there is still a lot that Rwanda needs to do. While this short paper is not exhaustive, a lot has definitely happened in the last twenty years. It is easy to put up new infrastructures, but it is not easy to rebuild hearts. The challenge of healing and reconciliation remains. In his recent exhortation to the Catholic Bishops of Rwanda in their *Ad Limina Apostolorum*, Pope Francis reminded the Rwandese people that reconciliation and healing of wounds remain a task and a mission for Rwanda (April 3, 2014). Having worked as a pastor with and for people in probably the best parish of Rwanda, *Regina Pacis-Remera*, I vividly recall how many wounds people are carrying in their hearts.

The youth of Rwanda need guidance. While education is accessible to many regardless of ethnic identity, what to do with one's education and who gets a job for a particular post is often a mystery. The rate of unemployment is not much less than other countries.

The media has been a double-edged sword in Rwanda. During the 1994 genocide, while the radios (in particular) were used as a medium to incite people to violence and killings, soon after the genocide, they were used to draw many children back to school. While there are often complaints about liberty of expression in

Rwanda, one big challenge for us is how to develop a literate media, not manipulated by selfish ideologies and how we can use the media to “remember rightly,” without exclusion.

Rwanda opened its doors to Christianity a century ago and the Churches have been instrumental in the development of the country. The Catholic Church has played a significant role in education, health care, and youth programs. Since the advent of Christianity in Rwanda, the people continue to have a deep longing and desire to know God. *Kibeho*, the place of apparitions officially acknowledged by the Church, has become a place of healing and encounter with God in the last two decades.

Has the sun thus shone on Rwanda? The answer with no uncertainty is indeed “Yes!” We hope that it will continue to shine in people’s hearts and leaders too as we continue to reconcile with one another. Has God come back to Rwanda? He had actually not left us! We (his people) left God. We now deeply realize it as renewed search and faith are deepened. Economic success will definitely not be enough if leaders’ and people hearts are not healed and we remain divided.

As conclude this article, I would like to share my personal testimony. In the last twenty years, God brought me to a school of forgiveness. I met one of the killers of my brothers and sister. Upon seeing me, he came towards me. I thought he was coming to kill me too. But I could not believe what happened; it appeared like a movie; he knelt before me and asked me to forgive him. After sometime of confusion, asking myself what was happening ... by which force I could not describe then ... I took him and embraced him and said: I forgive you; the Lord has been good to me. Ever since, I have felt free! I have realized that forgiveness heals even more the forgiver than the forgiven. My wounds have been able to heal others. I later found myself desiring to give the gift of my very self to the Lord as a companion of Jesus [Jesuit], who I am as I write. Jesuits attracted me first by their depth in preaching and conversation at Centre *Christus*, a Jesuit Spiritual Center in Kigali. Listening to some of them, they sounded different. They knew the brokenness of our world, their own, and made us realize that the Son of God was broken too. The power of God was manifested through weakness on the Cross. “Rwanda can rise again,” they preached! They looked so free, despite their brokenness. Twenty years after the genocide, I am a Jesuit priest, yet in April 1994, a priest threw me out of Byimana Church when I sought safety front the killers. I thought God could never call me to priesthood! But God works in strange ways! As a Jesuit, I have experienced serenity of heart. I have learnt how my wounded-ness profoundly relates me to God, providing for his grace to be seen and be able to help others who are wounded too in their struggle and darkness as we all seek reconciliation and salvation. I look to Mary, *Mother of the Word*, who came to Kibeho, to obtain for us continuous conversion.

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