

Spiritan Ministry with War & Conflict Affected Communities

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*...we must make ourselves "the advocates, the supporters and the defenders of the weak and the little ones against all who oppress them"*¹

Introduction:

The above words of our second founder, Francis Libermann, C.S.Sp. led him to encourage his Spiritan missionaries to direct special efforts to the African Diaspora who had been forcibly uprooted from their homes as slaves. In keeping with his vision and in view of the signs of the times, the Congregation of the Holy Spirit has identified ministry with forced migrants as a priority.² According to the UNHCR as of the end of 2013, worldwide there were 16.7 million refugees, with another 1.1 million seeking asylum and more than 33.3 million internally displaced people.³

Spiritans working in war and conflict affected countries have engaged in ministry with the forcibly displaced after finding themselves caught up in the midst of huge waves of people fleeing their homes. This was the case of our confreres working in Nigeria during the Biafran war, and in the 1990's with the refugees from Liberia fleeing to Sierra Leone, and then from Sierra Leone and Liberia to Guinea. Spiritans working in countries like South Africa, Zimbabwe and Congo Brazzaville have welcomed refugees fleeing from the conflicts in the Great Lakes Region countries of Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Rwanda. Other Spiritans gravitate towards ministries in their home countries with refugees and migrants who have fled conflicts and hardship in the countries where those Spiritans had previously worked. Spiritans founded *Concern*, an international aid agency, *Spirasi*, a center in Ireland with special concern for victims of torture and *Revive*, its equivalent in England, and the *Refugee Pastoral Services* in the Archdiocese of Durban, South Africa to address the spiritual, material and psycho-social needs of displaced peoples.

Ultimately, the goal of our ministries is to help bring about peace and reconciliation which will permit the forcibly displaced to return home in safety and dignity. Spiritans, again in keeping with Libermann's vision, go beyond the immediate manifestations of war or conflict and the needs generated thereby, to address the underlying causes, not only on behalf of, but ideally in solidarity with, the poor and oppressed from their perspective and priorities.⁴ A Spiritan was a co-founder of the Africa Faith & Justice Network (AFJN) in the US and the lead negotiator in setting up its European counterpart, the Africa Europe Faith & Justice Network (AEFJN). We remain active members in both organizations in their lobbying and advocacy efforts at the legislative branches of the US & the European Union on important issues affecting the African peoples. More recently, the Congregation has joined with other like-minded religious congregations in VIVAT, an NGO which advocates and lobbies at the UN on pressing issues raised by our confreres and others working at the grassroots level in their respective countries.

In this article I would like to describe two ministries in which I personally have worked over the years; the first is in Tanzania and the second is in the Central African Republic.

Refugee Ministry in Western Tanzania:

During the past twenty years, Spiritans have ministered in six UNHCR sponsored camps for the refugees from Rwanda, Burundi and the DRC who fled to the Rulenge and Kigoma Dioceses of western Tanzania. The Rwandan refugees were forced back to Rwanda in December 1996, and by 2012, all of the camps for the Burundian refugees in Tanzania were closed in the wake of a program to promote repatriation. Those Burundians who were granted continued asylum were moved to the Nyarugusu camp in Kigoma where they are living with refugees from the DRC. However, in the face of the recent pre-election violence in Burundi, over 105,000 refugees



Bro. Mariano Espinoza talking with children among newly arrived refugees from Burundi, June 2015

have fled to neighboring countries including Tanzania. More than 18,000 have been brought to Nyarugusu while awaiting a new site to be opened for them.^{5,6} Recently the UNHCR and the Government of Tanzania announced a plan to resettle up to 32,000 Congolese refugees to the United States between 2014 and 2018. This will be in addition to the thousands of refugees who have already been resettled, not only in the US, but in numerous other countries as well.

Two Spiritans continue to work in refugee ministry in Nyarugusu: Brother Mariano Espinoza, C.S.Sp. from the Paraguay International Group and Father Deocar Massawe, C.S.Sp. of the Province of Tanzania. Another, Father Joachim Bilembo, C.S.Sp., a Spiritan from the Foundation of DRC, has recently gone for further studies after working for almost six years with the Spiritan Refugee Ministry team in Kigoma.

At Nyarugusu there are currently about 11,000 registered Catholics with 38 small Christian communities, each of which is visited at least once a year. In addition to Sunday masses, the sacrament of reconciliation, funerals, and visitation of the sick, there are baptisms, confirmations, and weddings. Catechists play a crucial role in teaching and preparing people for reception of the sacraments. They also conduct services of the word and prayer when it is not possible for a priest to celebrate mass.

Seminars, workshops and counseling are offered to help parishioners deepen their commitment to the faith, especially in the face of the daily struggles of life in exile and in the difficult work for peace and reconciliation. They are encouraged to reach out to the chronically ill, the elderly and the orphans among them regardless of their religious affiliation. Their help is also essential in the construction and repairs of the church and other facilities for meetings and classes. There are numerous Catholic action groups, as well as a vocations group which engage in various church activities. To complement the efforts of the faithful to help their neighbors in difficulty, our Spiritan confreres organize monthly meals for the orphans and the elderly and, during the holiday seasons, bi-annual distributions of clothes, blankets and soap. All these efforts have to be planned and coordinated in regular meetings with the catechists and other members of the church leadership.

One of the great difficulties in refugee life in Tanzania is that opportunities for employment or income generating projects within the camp are very limited and the refugees are not permitted to seek work outside the camp. As a result, the vast majority of them are entirely dependent on the meager rations they receive from the bi-weekly food distributions. This policy has led to the long term impoverishment of the refugee population. To have a large number of people, especially young men, without gainful employment also raises questions of security.

To address this and other issues, Spiritan confreres have engaged in efforts to advocate on behalf of the refugees and to promote peace and reconciliation. In 2002 the Joint Commission for Refugees (JCR) was formed by the Bishops' Conferences of Burundi and Tanzania. Spiritans were among the original members and they participated in the JCR's activities throughout the eight years of its existence. Through the JCR, delegations



Fr. Deocar Massawe anointing elderly woman

from Burundi visited all the refugee camps and settlements in Tanzania; and delegations of the pastoral workers from the camps and settlements in Tanzania visited sites for the displaced in Burundi. Similar efforts with the Church in the dioceses of origin of the refugees from the DRC have been organized. These contacts with the country of origin also help in securing church records of sacraments received and liturgical resources.

The JCR's advocacy initiatives also included the publication of the booklet The Way Forward to Peace and Security, Good Governance and Development in The Great Lakes Region on behalf of the Tanzania Episcopal Conference (TEC),⁷ and the article *The Presence of the Burundian Refugees in Western Tanzania: Ethical Responsibilities as a Framework for Advocacy* published in **Refugee Rights: Ethics, Advocacy and Africa**.⁸

The repatriation of over 350,000 Burundians from the refugee camps in western Tanzania is regarded as a model of success. However, the recent flight of tens of thousands of refugees from Burundi, only three years after the closing of the last camp, Mtabila, raises serious questions about when the necessary conditions to permit repatriation in safety and dignity are present in the country of origin, and who makes that decision. The program of repatriation used both positive and negative incentives, with the latter including the closing of schools and markets, as well as the prohibition of cultivation of plots in the camp. Without these "negative incentives" it is doubtful that such a large number of the Burundian refugees would have opted to repatriate. In a recent email, Br. Mariano expresses his own deep distress over the current situation in a cry to God that must be on the minds of many of the Burundians who, once more, have been forced to flee their homes: *My God, how long will this go on? Till when will these poor people continue to flee their homes? What is the lasting solution to their exile here in our site and who will help them? God have mercy on us - we only human. Pray for us.*⁹



JCR Meeting, at Gitega, Burundi co-chaired by Bishop Joachim Ntahondereye of Muyinga, Burundi (center left), and then Bishop Paul Ruzoka of Kigoma, Tanzania (center right)



Workshop in Gitega on truth and reconciliation commissions for Burundi bishops, vicar generals and heads of J&P commissions

Ministry with War-Affected Communities in the Central African Republic:

In September 2014 Fr. Gabriel Myotte -Duquet, C.S.Sp. of the Province of France and myself were sent to the Central African Republic (CAR) in response to a request by fellow Spiritan, Archbishop Dieudonné Nzapalainga, C.S.Sp., for help with the Archdiocese of Bangui's pastoral outreach to war-affected communities. Following visits to numerous sites for the displaced, we settled on Camp Beal for ex-combatants of the Seleka militia, and the site for the displaced at the M'Poko International Airport as our priorities. Gabriel took primary responsibility for Camp Beal, with a special



A meal for the orphans at Nyarugusu



Frs. Deocar Massawe and Joachim Bilembo (foreground, left to right) in meeting with church leaders SRS Meeting



Tents set up at Nyarugusu for newly arrived refugees from Burundi June 2015

focus on helping the children there to get access to education. However, for security reasons we were not able to offer pastoral services there. I began accompanying Fr. Tito Sayo, a diocesan priest, at the Sunday Masses at M'Poko. Fr. Tito is also the pastor of St. Mathias Parish from which many of the displaced had fled when fighting broke out in the predominantly Muslim district where the parish is located. On Christmas Eve he returned to St. Mathias to celebrate mass for the first time in months. After that we took turns - one celebrating mass at the parish and the other at M'Poko.

Both Gabriel and myself were greatly privileged to accompany Archbishop Dieudonné on some of his numerous visits with members of the two main militias, the Anti-balaka and the Seleka, as well as to villages outside Bangui.

From the beginning of conflict in CAR, the Archbishop has worked in collaboration with the presidents of the association of protestant churches and of the Islamic community to promote peace and reconciliation. During the height of the conflict, Archbishop Dieudonné gave refuge to the Imam at his home for months. Together, the three continually stress that the conflict is not religious in nature, calling on Christians and Muslims alike not to kill, and condemning the actions of both the Anti-balaka and the Seleka who do so. Instead they insist that the conflict is between those who wish to protect their power and the riches that accompany it, and those who wish to gain access to it. They visit villages together, each going to their proper religious communities to share their message of peace and then bringing the entire community together to share the results of their discussions. In an interview with the Spiritan magazine *Kontinente*, the Archbishop explains:

*It is our task...to give people the chance to speak, to make the truth known, to disarm spirits who wish to seek revenge, who harbor resentment against others and seek an eye for an eye.*¹⁰

On his visit to the parish of Bogangou, one of leaders of the village of Gbangou asked the Archbishop to visit his people who had fled into the bush after their homes were burnt in the wake of a dispute between two members of the Anti-balaka. One of them, from Gbangou, had killed the other who was from another village. In retaliation,

the leader of the Anti-balaka in the other village sent his combatants to burn down the houses in the first village - over 200 of them. When we arrived, a leader from the first village led us for an hour's walk into the bush to where the people were staying. Reporters accompanied the Archbishop and took photos; later they published the name of the commander of the Anti-balaka who had ordered the village to be burnt.

The Archbishop was so shocked at the dire situation in which the people were living that he decided to return a month later with aid for them. Food, clothing and various household utensils were distributed by *Caritas*, the Catholic aid agency of the Archdiocese and members of various Catholic Action groups. *Codis*, the Catholic health care NGO of the Archdiocese, held a clinic, doing medical exams and distributing medicine to hundreds of people. A meal

was prepared after which Mass was celebrated. The Archbishop then gathered the people to listen to their concerns and to share with them his own advice as to the way forward to peace and reconciliation. Not everyone is happy with what Archbishop Dieudonné is doing. The leader of the Anti-balaka who was accused of ordering the village of Gbangou burnt threatened him. Later, after that leader was arrested, his brother kidnapped Brother Gustave Reosse, C.S.Sp. a Spiritan, and Claudia Priest, a French benefactor of *Codis*, to use them as bargaining chips in demanding the release of his brother. Fortunately the two were set free unharmed five days later after intense negotiations led by the Archbishop. That was only one among numerous threats aimed at him.

It is the Archbishop's faith which sustains him in the overwhelming task of working for peace and reconciliation, even as he himself has to deal with the risks involved. In his interview with *Kontinente*, he says:

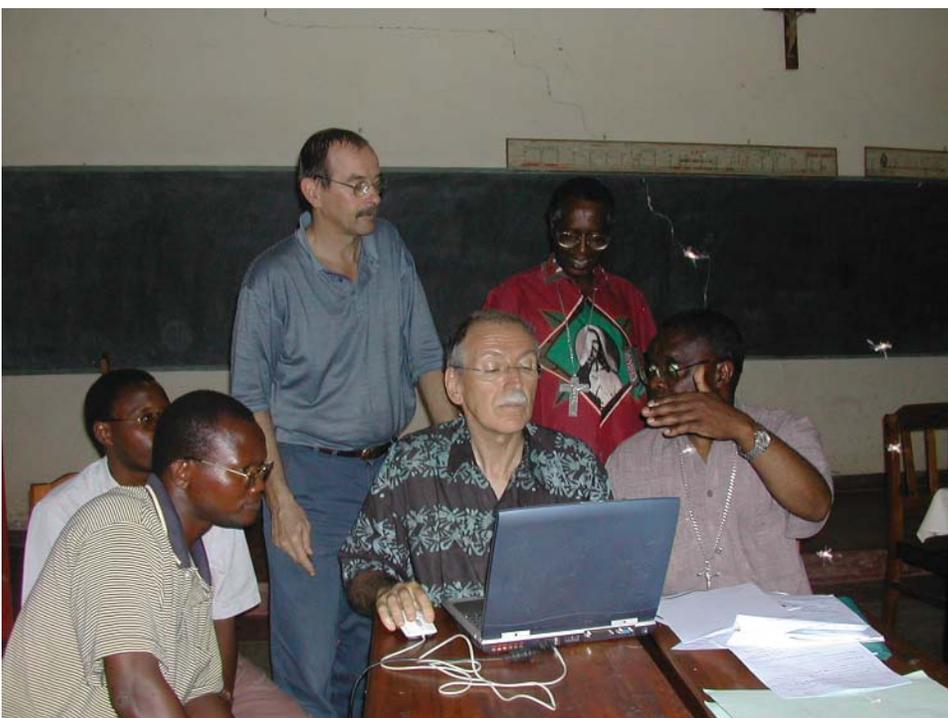
*When [my time] comes, I will freely give my life and I'm not afraid....My presence raises hope for people... who are abandoned, despised, forgotten in the most remote corners. That's why I have to meet them to tell them they are not forgotten. God has not forgotten you.*¹¹

Closing:

I would like to close by highlighting what I believe are some common characteristics of Spiritan ministry with war and conflict affected communities. At a workshop in Durban in 2007 for Spiritans working in refugee ministry, one of the participants, speaking from his experience in Sierra Leone, said "We Spiritans stay with



Paul Flamm, CSSp (left, former head of mission) thanking youth of different ethnic groups from Burundi for coming to participate in youth revival at Mtabila



JCR secretariat preparing press release for visit to Bujumbura, Burundi; Bishop Paul Ruzoka, Kigoma (rear right), Bishop Joachim Ntahondereye of Myuinga (front right) and Paul Flamm, CSSp (rear center)

our people." For me, that means that our ministry is first and foremost one of presence and accompaniment, reminding those in difficulty that, as Archbishop Dieudonné says, they are not forgotten by God or by the Church. We don't wait for people to come to us; instead we go to meet them wherever they are - physically and spiritually. We pray together to create a spiritual bond which brings about a necessary sense of mutual trust that is sadly so often lacking otherwise. Listening is essential. We work with the affected community to strengthen their unity and leadership. Our hope is to mobilize them as effective agents of change in the service of their own needs and priorities with us acting in solidarity with them as liaisons and advocates with relevant agencies and institutions.



Welcoming JCR members to site for internally displaced in Bujumbura, Burundi; Bishop Paul Ruzoka, Kigoma (center right), Bishop Joachim Ntahondereye of Muyinga (center left)

Both the pastoral services and the material aid which we offer flow from our faith commitment to the well-being of all concerned without regard to their religious affiliation. That commitment also insulates us from the political and financial constraints that are often placed on the continued presence of NGO's. We collaborate with the latter as well as other concerned agencies and institutions; and, where possible, we try to complement the aid they provide. While we take the part of those with whom we minister in our peace and reconciliation initiatives, we reach across boundaries to try to create an environment where it is possible to bring together the parties in conflict. In that sense, we are called to play a prophetic role, recognizing that all parties are often at fault in one way or another. That means speaking out against violence and acts of retribution and highlighting areas where change is needed on all sides. Our presence in war and conflict affected communities calls us to accept the risks inherently present in such an environment as we draw inspiration from the resilience and courage of those whom we serve.

Finally, all of the above requires a long term commitment of the Congregation itself, as well as of specific personnel.

¹ Congregation of the Holy Spirit, *Spiritual Rule of Life* (SRL) 14 (Rule of 1849; N.D. X, 517)

² *Ibid.*, SRL 18.1

³ UNHCR, *Facts and Figures about Refugees*, 14 June 2015, <http://www.unhcr.org/uk/about-us/key-facts-and-figures.html>

⁴ cf Kilcrann, C.S.Sp., John, *Constructing a Contemporary Spiritan JPIC Spirituality, East African Formators Course: JPIC Spirituality Construction: 3 Important Elements*, Bagamoyo, Tanzania, June 9 - 13, 014

⁵ UNHCR, *UNHCR says more than 105,000 refugees have fled violence in Burundi*, <http://www.unhcr.org/5555f62a6.html>

⁶ Aljazeera, Tanzania camp overstretched by Burundi refugee influx, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/05/burundi-tanzania-refugees-150523073658128.html>

⁷ Tanzania Episcopal Conference (TEC), *The Way Forward to Peace and Security, Good Governance and Development in The Great Lakes Region*, submitted to the UN/AU International Conference on Peace, Security, Democracy and Development in the Great Lakes Region, Dar es Salaam, November 2004, TEC Dar es Salaam, May 2005

⁸ Hollenbach, SJ, David, ed., *Refugee Rights: Ethics, Advocacy and Africa*, Georgetown University Press, Washington D.C., 2008

⁹ Espinoza, Mariano, email, May 29, 2015 (translated by P. Flamm from Swahili)

¹⁰ L'archevêque Nzapalainga, Dieudonné, *On est centrafricain avant de choisir une religion*, interview with *Kontinente*, May 2015, p4 (Translated by P. Flamm from French)

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp 6-7 (Translated by P. Flamm from French)