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1.

THE NIGHT OF THE SWORD

And this is the verdict, that the light came into the world, but people preferred darkness to light, because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come toward the light, so that his works might not be exposed. But whoever lives the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be clearly seen as done in God.

—John 3:19–21



THE BEGINNING OF THE END—DECEMBER 1963

“Close the door when I leave,” my father told my uncle, twelve-year-old Deogratias, who was living with us. “Do not open it again until morning. I am not sure that I will be back.” He could smell death.

I was sleeping, so I did not see him go. And I never saw him again. That night, my father, his brother Juvenal, and many other members of our family were killed. Horror swept the village, leaving widows and orphans with nobody to take care of them. I was only seven years old; my brother Révérien was five. My mother was at the hospital with my three-year-old brother, John Baptist, carrying my three-month-old sister, Pascasie, on her back.

When we woke up the next morning, my brother and I ran out into the yard to play, screaming and laughing. Suddenly our grandfather came straight to us with a lance in

hand, wild with grief. His appearance frightened us—we did not understand why he was so angry and had never seen him so distraught. We ran into the house and closed the door.

“Your father has been killed! Juvenal has been killed! Canisius and Callixte have been killed!” On and on, my grandfather listed the names of the victims of that horrible night. Our mother had not been there to comfort us, only our uncle, who was only a boy himself.

At about noon the next day, our mother arrived at home and learned what had happened to my father. I can still hear the sound of her sorrow. She was now a widow, and we were fatherless. I didn’t understand what that meant for us at that time. I didn’t know what it means to die or why my mother was weeping.

We hadn’t seen her for weeks and were so happy to see her. We didn’t understand why she wasn’t smiling, why she was so sad, so quiet. She had lost her husband forever. But we did not understand what that meant. We were just happy to have her with us again.



VOICES OF THE GENOCIDE

Fr. Ubald’s mother is a heroic figure as the widowed family matriarch. His sister, Pascasie, remembers their mother, Anysie, as a strong and prayerful woman who seldom spoke of her husband. When Pascasie turned eighteen, she asked her mother to tell her about him and was surprised when her mother did not immediately answer. At last she turned to her daughter and spoke.

“‘Ubald is built like your father, but Révérien’s face is more like his,’ my mother said. Then she grew silent again, until at last she looked up. ‘Now I need to go see about my bananas.’ And she left very



Fr. Ubald's sister, Pascasie

quickly. I think it was hard for her to talk about even that much."



Life changed that night, changed for all of us. Our joy was taken from us as, very slowly, we began to understand the meaning of death, that we would never again sit in the presence of our father, who had simply vanished. We were forced to endure real poverty—no more tea, no more meat, none of the privileges we had known. My father was no longer there to give us these things.

I began to have dreams about my father and told my mother that I had seen him. "No," she told me. "You have not seen him. You will not see him again." It took time for her to convince me that my father was dead. There was no body; victims of the night sword received no Christian burial. In many cases, there were no family members to



Fr. Ubald with his brother Révérien (right)

bury them, because they had either been killed or gone into hiding to escape the slaughter. We never knew where or even if our father had been buried. We spent a long time at home without going to school, for our mother was afraid that those who killed our father could kill us also on the way to school.

In the years following my father's death, my mother was forced to work hard; he had been a teacher, and without my father's salary from the school, it became more and more difficult to survive as a family. Even so, Mother oversaw our education and made great sacrifices so we could stay in school. She also took care of our spiritual education and prepared us for our First Communion and the Sacrament of Confirmation. She herself was an active participant in the Legion of Mary.

In 1970, at the end of elementary school, I chose to go to minor seminary. I thought about becoming a priest. I had been influenced by Fr. Innocent Gashugi, a priest who led

a children's music program at school. He taught us songs and was so kind to us.

One day in his homily at a Mass with schoolchildren, he spoke about Jesus as the Good Shepherd; Fr. Innocent explained that, as a priest, he is to be a good shepherd and that Christians are the flock. At that time the Holy Spirit helped me respond to the call to become a priest.

This calling to the priesthood did not come easily for me. When I was ready to take entrance exams to minor seminary, our parish priest decided that I should be deleted from the list because I was the oldest son of a widow. He said I needed to go and help my mother after I finished school. When my mother, who was spiritually discerning, heard this, she went to the priest and persuaded him that it was God's will that I become a priest, though I was her oldest son.

Finally the parish priest relented. He let me take the test for minor seminary.

LEAVING HOME—SEPTEMBER 1970

Though I was a little sad to leave my mother, I was also full of joy. I spent the first two years of minor seminary at Mibirizi parish. One of my uncles, Barthelemy, who was a teacher, accompanied me and showed me the way.

I first arrived at the seminary late in the afternoon, happy to be there at last. My dream to become a priest was going to become a reality. It was a whole new world for me, starting on the first evening when I discovered electric power for the first time; a generator provided electric energy, and there were electric lights inside the church and in the dining room, classrooms, and dormitory. What a surprise!

All of us arrived at the seminary, coming from different parishes of the diocese. In elementary school we had one teacher who took care of the school and taught everything to us. Now we had many different teachers to teach different lessons. It was really an adventure, a new life.

It was a happy time for me. We had a good priest who was rector of the seminary, Fr. Charles Kabaka. He was a good-natured man who impressed me so much. We prayed, studied, and played together; that was our daily occupation. The secondary school fees were expensive, but I knew my mother was a hard worker and never imagined she might have trouble paying them. It was a happy time of my life. But that happiness did not last for long.

THE SWORD FALLS AGAIN—FEBRUARY 1973

I had just completed my second year of studies when I moved to St. Pius X in Nyundo in 1972, which was about ten hours north. My brother Révérien joined me there when the St. Aloys seminary was closed. The roads were bad, and travel was expensive, but we did not worry about that so much. We left the financial concerns to our mother, who still needed to feed our brother and sister. How would she find travel money for our trip home for Christmas holidays? We did not know. She worked hard, selling banana beer and other articles from her harvest. And somehow, we had money to travel home for the Christmas holidays.

It was to be our last Christmas Day together in Rwanda.

The following February all Tutsi students were chased away from schools by Hutu students. It was horrible! What violence! The same thing was happening in all secondary schools across the country. We had thought that because we were good Christians, in minor seminary preparing to become good priests, such violence could not happen to us.

We were wrong.

One Sunday after evening prayer, the older Hutu seminarians prepared to chase all Tutsi students from the seminary grounds. Older Tutsi students fled the campus, most of them taking refuge in the major seminary or at the bishop's house.

For some reason the younger seminarians were spared, and we stayed quiet that night as we went and slept. The next day the older Tutsi seminarians were sent home, but

the younger seminarians were permitted to stay. The priests thought that because we were young, we could stay quiet and study. But that is not what happened. Once the older Tutsi students were gone, the hatred of the Hutu students turned upon us. In the middle of the day, we Tutsi seminarians fled to the major seminary, arriving tired and hungry.

Later that afternoon, the sister who worked in the minor seminary kitchen arrived with food for us, and we were piled in classrooms around the major seminary. Then, at three o'clock that afternoon, three young men we did not know entered the seminary, brandishing machetes and screaming at us, full of hatred.

We were afraid. We hid under desks, and one brave man, a major seminarian and deacon named Ruzindana Didace, approached the intruders and tried to convince them that those who had fled to the major seminary were too young to concern them and that the older ones had already left. Those young men looked at us with fury, and after a time they left. But we knew we would not be safe for long, that most likely the men would return under cover of darkness.

That evening the priests took us to a secret place inside a diocesan storeroom. There were no beds, but it did not matter. None of us slept that night. A band of Hutus—seminarians and local tribesmen—attacked the seminary again that night, but they did not find us where the spies had reported us to be. Once more we narrowly escaped death.

It was not safe for us to remain at the seminary, and the rector—a sympathetic Hutu priest named Monsignor Matthieu Ntahoruburiye—did what he could to get us safely home. One Tutsi major seminarian, Epaphrodite Kayinamura, had broken his leg while fleeing the attack, and so early in the morning the rector of the minor seminary, Fr. Charles Kabaka, rented a great truck to drive us all home.

As we neared Kibuye, we found that a bridge on the road had been destroyed, forcing us to walk the rest of the way. We loaded our trunks on our heads and began to walk.

At the Kibuye parish, the parish priest, a Tutsi named Fr. Sekabaraga, was afraid to help us and urged us to move on, fearing we would be exposed to greater danger from the government soldiers living near the prefecture. He gave us some water to drink, and we went on, arriving at Mubuga parish later in the evening, famished and exhausted.

At Mubuga, the parish priest, Fr. Kayumba Simon, was not there, so we waited for him, thinking he could rent a car to drive us home. Later that day we learned he had been arrested and put in prison in Cyangugu prefecture for helping some Tutsi people escape the violence.

At about three o'clock that afternoon we heard a truck arrive and saw it was full of young people, armed with swords. Thinking it was Hutu seminarians who had pursued us, we fled and ran in every direction—some toward Lake Kivu, others to the bush. In the panic and commotion, I lost Révérien.

A group of us fled once more to the next neighboring Kibingo parish. The pastor, Fr. Innocent, had been my music teacher in primary school, and his life's witness first encouraged me to become a priest. He welcomed us and prepared food for us to eat. We were so hungry! After we had eaten, he showed us where to sleep, and in the morning after saying Mass with us and feeding us breakfast, he blessed us as we set out for home. He was at my ordination in 1984, and he died of diabetes during the genocide, unable to get to the hospital for medical help.

The nightmare continued as we finally neared our village. Wherever we went, people screamed at us mercilessly, as if we were criminals. Hutu tribesmen had set up roadblocks everywhere, and we knew that if we were discovered they could kill us. We walked all day, looking for a safe route home, and when night came we slept in the bush after crossing the Mwaga River.

Early in the morning we stood up and went on. I arrived at the home of my mother's brother at about ten o'clock that

morning. He gave me food, but I had not had food or water for an entire day and night, and I swallowed with difficulty.

I did not know where my brother was, and I dreaded going home to my mother without news of him. When I arrived at home at about one o'clock that afternoon, my mother met me with horror and fear in her eyes. "Where is your brother?" she asked me.

I told her that Révérien had been lost when fleeing from the attack of Mubuga parish. And when he finally arrived home late that evening, my brother told us he had hidden in the bush near Mubuga parish as Hutu students from Shyogwe secondary school chased the Tutsi students away from Mubuga's secondary girl's school. Only after the Hutu students had gone had my brother dared set out for home.

"It is not safe for you here, either," my mother told us, her face lined with fear. She was afraid our Hutu neighbors would kill us or see our presence as an invitation to drive us all from our home. Finally she agreed that we should all flee south to Burundi with our uncle Barthelemy. He was a primary school teacher facing prison time, simply because he was Tutsi.

FINDING GOD IN BURUNDI—APRIL 1973

We left in April, my mother and uncle, my brothers Révérien and John Baptist, and my little sister and me. Around Christmastime, after a coup d'état in Rwanda's capital city of Kigali, my mother's brother sent a message to us: "There is peace in Rwanda now—come back home." And so my mother and John Baptist returned to our home at the Karengera Commune in Mwezi parish, leaving my sister in Uncle Barthelemy's care. My mother needed to work the land or there would be no money for us to live on, so she went back to plant the beans and corn and to harvest the bananas.

Révérien and I arrived at the minor seminary of Kanyosha in Burundi, in the Bujumbura diocese, and met many other seminarians from all over Rwanda. We were all to be

lodged there before being transferred to different minor seminaries all over the country.

We left Kanyosha in September 1973, so grateful to the rector, Fr. Nkanira, who had found places for us in other secondary schools when there were no more places in minor seminaries in Burundi. Years later, after the 1994 genocide, all the former seminarians who had been hosted by Fr. Nkanira had returned to our homeland and invited him to visit us in Rwanda, to thank him for his hospitality.

Once I had completed minor seminary studies, it came time for me to choose whether to continue graduate studies at the major seminary or to leave and pursue another course of study. I had thought seriously about going to medical school, and I had continued high school studies in minor seminary only because my spiritual director, Fr. Bihege Laurent, told me that it would be easier for me to get into medical school at university if I first completed my undergraduate course of studies. So I stayed, though for some time I was unsure about becoming a priest. I had experienced so much loss, so many bad things; my faith was in crisis. I did not spend much time in prayer, only what I was obliged to do as part of my seminary studies. But slowly, over time, God changed my heart.

THE ROSARY OF MY LIFE

One of the people God used to change my perspective was a seminary classmate named Nasar Kibuti. One afternoon, as we were running back to the dormitory after a football game, Nasar shared with me how he always felt happy after playing football. "I take a shower and then, fresh and healthy, I go to the chapel to pray the Rosary before it's time to do homework," he said to me. His words surprised me so much that I had to stop running. He stopped too. "What's wrong? Are you all right?"

"Does everyone pray the Rosary in seminary?" I asked him. I honestly had no idea! I confessed to Nasar that I never prayed a Rosary on my own.