

Spring 2022

Chapter 6. The Cry of the Vulnerable: Twenty-Five Years in Permanent State of Transition

Paul Flamm C.S.Sp.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-horizons>



Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Flamm, P. (2022). Chapter 6. The Cry of the Vulnerable: Twenty-Five Years in Permanent State of Transition. *Spiritan Horizons*, 18 (18). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-horizons/vol18/iss18/16>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Spiritan Horizons (English, French, and Portuguese) at Duquesne Scholarship Collection. It has been accepted for inclusion in Spiritan Horizons by an authorized editor of Duquesne Scholarship Collection.

Chapter 6

The Cry of the Vulnerable: Twenty-Five Years in Permanent State of Transition Among Refugee Communities

Twenty-Five Years of Refugee Ministry

The night of December 23, 1995 I attended my first Mass in the refugee camp of Kagenyi, in the Diocese of Rulenge, in the far northwestern corner of Tanzania bordering on Rwanda. I was doing my pastoral year as a Spiritan seminarian of the former East Province of the United States. The late Fr. Josaphat Kilawila, CSSp, at that time a newly ordained Spiritan of the Province of Tanzania, was the celebrant. He had already hooked up a wire from the battery of our car to the light hung over the altar inside a church built of wooden poles and plastic sheeting that was packed to capacity.

As I was being jostled about by the crowd of people moving forward to receive communion, I distinctly remember feeling that, as a member of a congregation of religious missionaries dedicated to the evangelization of the poor and the oppressed, especially those whose needs are the greatest, this was where we should be.

We were four Spiritans working in Kagenyi and Rubwera, two of the smaller camps opened to accommodate the huge influx of the Rwandan refugees in the wake of the 1994 genocide: Fr. Josaphat, Fr. Gervase Taratara, a newly ordained Spiritan from the Province of Tanzania, Fr. Gabriel Myotte-Duquet, of the French Province, and myself. I left in June 1996, followed by Gabriel in September that year. The ministry itself in Rulenge came to an abrupt end when the Rwandans were sent back to their country in December 1996.

However, the ministry in Rulenge opened the door to what is now a twenty-five year commitment by our Congregation to ministry with refugee communities from Rwanda, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) living in various camps in Western Tanzania.

In 1997, Fr. Josaphat and Fr. Gervase, who was head of the mission, moved to the neighboring diocese of Kigoma where Archbishop Paul Ruzoka, then bishop of Kigoma, entrusted to our Congregation the pastoral care of the Burundian Catholic community living in the former camps of Mtabila and Muyovozi. In 2008, Archbishop Protase Rugambwa, then Bishop of Kigoma, entrusted to the Spiritans the pastoral ministry for, at that time, the mostly Congolese Catholic community living in the Nyarugusu camp, north of Mtabila. However, by March 2018 there were over 70,000 Burundians also living in Nyarugusu, most of whom arrived in the wake of the 2015 post-election violence in Burundi.

Currently we are three Spiritans working in Nyarugusu: Fr. Daniel Waweru Makanja, CSSp, the superior of the Province of Kenya, Fr. Manwa Erasmus, CSSp, of the Province of Tanzania, and myself.

A Permanent State of Transition

PROTRACTED REFUGEE SITUATIONS

The UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) speaks of a huge increase in the worldwide number of displaced people over the last decade. By mid-2020 there was a staggering 26.4 million refugees and an additional 45.7



Fr. Daniel celebrating Mass

million internally displaced people. In a parallel trend, fewer people have been able to return home, while possibilities for local integration in host countries, or resettlement to third countries have been significantly reduced. The COVID-19 crisis has complicated matters, with additional restrictions on movement that further reduced opportunities for resettlement. As a result, an increasing number of people are living in protracted situations of displacement of five years or more.¹

1. UNHCR, *Global Trends Forced Displacement in 2019* at <https://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2019/>, 11–12, 24.

Tanzania has a long and proud history of welcoming refugees under its Open-Door Policy rooted in the Pan-African solidarity of Julius Nyerere. A more recent example was the granting of citizenship in 2014 to 162,000 Burundian refugees living in Tanzania since 1972.² However, the arrival of hundreds of thousands of refugees from Burundi, DRC, and Rwanda in the 1990's stretched that hospitality to its limits.

The statistics for Nyarugusu at time of press for this article show a total population of 130,961 people, composed mostly of 79,065 Congolese, of whom 60,584 arrived during the 1996 and 1998 wars in DRC, and 51,757 Burundians, most of whom arrived in the post-2015 election violence in their country.³ With the exception of 18,481 Congolese, who fled the pre-2017-election instability in DRC,⁴ all of them are among those living in protracted situations of displacement.

A REVOLVING DOOR OF EXILE

The history of the Burundian refugees, who at one time or another have lived in the camps of Tanzania, might better be described as a revolving door of exile. Burundians who fled in 1972 to Rwanda and/or eastern DRC (Zaire) later fled to Tanzania following the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and the 1996–98 wars in DRC. In addition, some 400,000 Burundians fled to Tanzania because of the civil war that broke out in their country in 1993.⁵ However, by 2012 all the camps in Tanzania for Burundians were closed, the last of which was Mtabila, with most of them returning to Burundi.

Three years later, following the post-2015 election insecurity and violence in Burundi, as many as 270,000 Burundians fled to Tanzania.⁶ Many of them had previously spent years in camps or settlements in Tanzania.

2. Francis Markus, *Tanzania Grants Citizenship to 162,000 Burundian Refugees in Historic Decision*, UNHCR: <https://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2014/10/5441246f6/tanzania-grants-citizenship-162000-burundian-refugees-historic-decision.html#:~:text=GENEVA%2C%20October%2017%2C%20UNHCR,solution%20to%20decades%20in%20ex,2014%2010%2017>.

3. UNHCR, *Tanzania Refugee Population Update*, UNHCR Tanzania Refugee Population Dashboard - June 2021.pdf, June 30, 2021.

4. UNHCR, *Tanzania Refugee Population Update*, 75979.pdf (reliefweb.int), March 31, 2020.

5. International Crisis Group (ICG), *Burundian Refugees In Tanzania: The Key Factor In The Burundi Peace Process*, ICG Central Africa Report N° 12 (30 November 1999) at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/burundi/burundian-refugees-tanzania-key-factor-burundi-peace-process>, 1.

6. UNHCR, *Inter-Agency Operational Update on the Burundi Refugee Situation: United Republic of Tanzania* (March 31 2018) at: <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/63537.pdf>.

Since 2017, 129,544 Burundians have returned to Burundi.⁷ After the May 2020 elections in Burundi, the Tanzanian government has taken various steps to convince the remaining Burundians to return home. Restrictions have been placed on markets, farming, and the construction of new shelters. In addition, concerns were raised by UN Human Rights Council experts of serious human rights violations, including arbitrary arrests, forced disappearances, torture, and forced returns to Burundi. Human Rights Watch and the UNHCR have raised these issues with Tanzanian authorities, who assured them that “high-level investigation was underway.”⁸

For its part, the UNHCR acknowledges that its 2020 *Burundi Regional Refugee Response Plan* was “critically underfunded [leading to] acute gaps, including food ration cuts, inadequate shelters, lack of medicines and other deficiencies.”⁹

In addition to the 51,757 Burundians living in Nyarugusu as of June 30, 2021, there were another 81,238 Burundians in the Mtendeli and Nduta camps, also in Kigoma.¹⁰ The Tanzanian Government insists that they go back home and has already requested that the United Nations remove their refugee status.

WHERE IS HOME?

Many of the refugees were born in exile, some have lived in two or three countries of exile and/or in two or more camps here in Tanzania. If you tell those whose parents have died to return home, they ask, “where is home?” One of the former leaders of our Burundi Catholic community in the Mtabila/Muyovozi camps, the late Victoria Butoyi, captures the deep sense of loss many among them must feel. Victoria was a teacher in Burundi prior to fleeing to DRC with her husband, Pio, in 1994. Two years later when war broke out in DRC, they were forced to make the harrowing trip across Lake Tanganyika, the second deepest lake in the world, in a small, dangerously overloaded boat. Upon arrival in Kigoma, they were settled in the Muyovozi refugee camp where Victoria

7. Op. Cit. UNHCR, June 30, 2021.

8. UN News, *Burundi Refugees in Tanzania living in Fear: UN Rights Experts*: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/04/1089632>, (April 13, 2021); see also Human Rights Watch, *Tanzania: Burundian Refugees ‘Disappeared,’ Tortured*: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/11/30/tanzania-burundian-refugees-disappeared-tortured> (30 Nov 2020).

9. UNHCR, *Burundi Regional Refugee Response Plan: January–December 2021*: <https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2021%20Burundi%20regional%20RRP%2014%20february%202021.pdf>, 5.

10. Op. Cit. UNHCR, June 30, 2021.

continued her work as a teacher. In 2007 the secondary schools were closed in order to put pressure on the refugees to return home. Later, Muyovozi itself was closed and those who remained were required to relocate to the neighboring Mtabila Extension camp. Even then it was difficult for Victoria to think of returning to Burundi where her father and three brothers were killed, and the rest of her family had since died. She told me:

“I just want to reach a place and build anew, to cleanse myself of all that has happened, to have security and to stay somewhere without moving again, to have a future for our children . . . To be constantly in the air is like dying slowly.”

In the end, Victoria and Pio decided that life in the camps was no longer tolerable. In 2009, they returned to Burundi.

Refugee Ministry

Practically speaking, our three churches in Nyarugusu fall under the jurisdiction of St. Luke Parish, Makere as outstations. Approximately 3,500 people attend our Sunday Masses. In addition, we offer all the pastoral services you would find in any parish. Canonically (Canon 568), refugee ministry falls under the category of chaplaincy.

CHURCH: A FUNDAMENTAL BUILDING-BLOCK OF SOCIETY

We now reflect on our experience in light of relevant literature.¹¹ Derek Summerfield argues that in the wake of violence “What is fundamental [is] to stabilize and repair the war-torn social fabric and to allow it to regain some of its traditional capacity to be a source of resilience and problem solving for all.”¹²

For people of faith, the church is essential in coming to grips with the social upheaval that accompanies violence, war, flight, and prolonged life in exile. Cultural and religious values are called into question. The normal

11. See Paul Flamm, “Refugee Ministry: Towards Healing and Reconciliation,” *Mission Studies*, XV (Jan 29, 1998) 99–125.

12. Derek Summerfield, “The Impact of War and Atrocity on Civilian Populations: Basic Principles for NGO Interventions and a Critique of Psychosocial Projects,” *Network Paper 14, Relief and Rehabilitation Network* (April 1996) 29.



Br. Mariano with Youth

tensions encountered in family life are exacerbated. A significant number of young couples live together and have children in hurried relationships that often end in separation. Gender-based violence affects families as well as the wider community.¹³

Most of the people are small-scale merchants or subsistence level farmers. Therefore, restrictions placed on movement outside the camp, as well as on cultivation and on markets within the camp, severely limit opportunities for employment. The resulting idleness invites loss of hope, as well as abuse of alcohol and other intoxicating substances. To address these concerns there is a great need to reinforce cultural and religious values that help build strong families and social relationships.

Fifty-five per cent of the refugee population is seventeen years old or under. Br. Mariano Espinoza, CSSp, from the International Group of Paraguay, was very active in ministry with the youth. He notes (in personal reflection to Fr. Flamm, April 30, 2021) that a prolonged period in a restricted space, like that of a refugee camp, without opportunities for personal development is particularly unfavorable for the youth. To see no possibility for a better future creates anxiety for them and this has a direct impact on the wider society. Therefore, there is a great need to accompany the youth during this critical time of self-discovery in their social and spiritual life as they find themselves in the unsettled situation of refugee life with little hope for anything different

13. Alexander Vu, Andrea Wirtz, Atif Adam, Kiemanh Pham, Leonard Rubenstein, Nancy Glass, Chris Beyrer C, & Sonal Singh. "The Prevalence of Sexual Violence among Female Refugees in Complex Humanitarian Emergencies: a Systematic Review and Meta-analysis." *PLOS Currents Disasters*. Edition 1 (Mar 18, 2014), <http://currents.plos.org/disasters/index.html%3Fp=11337.html>, 13–14.

in the future. Such formation begins with the young children who need to be nurtured in Christian values that will help them to form strong families and to become faithful and loving members of the church and society as they continue to grow. As St. John Paul II said, “the family continues to be [a person’s] existential horizon, that fundamental community in which the whole network of social relations is grounded, from the closest and most immediate to the most distant.”¹⁴ Programs to engage the children and youth in healthy and constructive activities are also needed.

In keeping with church guidelines for preparation for marriage, formation is offered via seminars, talks, and drama for various age groups. Catechists are key actors in imparting such formation. Other church leaders are also essential in these efforts. They are our eyes and ears to the daily life and struggles of our people. They are the ones to mobilize the community in implementing our pastoral programs. Other members of the faithful have been chosen by their Small Christian Communities to offer guidance to youth and married couples. However, catechists and other church leaders are among those caught up in the coming and going of our faithful. As a result, there is an ongoing need to strengthen newly chosen church leadership through seminars and workshops.

Our churches are also blessed with various associations and groups that are essential to our liturgical celebrations and other church activities. In addition, their guidelines and charisms encourage members to perform acts of mercy for their neighbors in difficulty. For example, care for the chronically ill and disabled is one of the most pressing needs of our churches. Fr. Deockary Massawe, CSSp, of the Province of Tanzania who was very diligent in visiting hundreds of the sick on a regular basis, says (in personal reflection to Fr. Flamm, April 17, 2021) that he himself felt “deeply wounded [. . .] witnessing such indescribable and avoidable sufferings experienced.” He speaks of “dehumanizing conditions faced by the sick and elderly refugees [. . .] Hunger, malnutrition, chronic diseases [. . .] and many other problems are on the rise [. . .] because of improper care [and] insufficient attention to the protection of their basic rights.”

In such conditions, family members and the faithful in their Small Christian Communities are the “first responders” to the cries of the most vulnerable. Therefore, one of our priorities has been to encourage the members of our various church

14. *Year of the Family: Letter to Families* (Vatican 1994) 2.

associations and groups to work with the leaders in their Small Christian Communities where they live in helping the sick and elderly among their neighbors.

In addition, because of the severe limitations on formal medical care, we act as liaisons between the chronically ill and the health services and other aid agencies in securing treatment and assistance where possible. Pastoral visits are essential in offering spiritual consolation and healing to them. Similarly, orphans and widows are among those most likely to be poor and isolated. They too need to experience God's love and care to make them feel they are valued members of the community.

Trauma often accompanies experiences of violence and flight into exile. Because of the close rapport he developed, not only with the youth, but also among all the faithful, Br. Mariano became a trusted person to approach for those bearing the inner wounds of trauma. That, combined with his formal studies in psychology at the *Institut de Formation Humaine Intégral de Montréal*, enabled him to accompany them in the long journey to healing. Mariano, in an observation sent to Fr. Flamm (April 30, 2021), says that "[Accompanying] a person with traumatic experiences is a delicate and very evangelical ministry; it is love brought to life [. . .] Conversations, exchanges, sharing, silence in listening, prayers [. . .] were the means of finding a path to inner healing."

Conflicts in the Great Lakes Region have spilled over country borders creating regional tensions. Therefore, one of our goals is to strengthen the unity between the Burundian and Congolese communities through common liturgical celebrations, like our celebrations of the 150 Year Jubilee of Evangelization in Tanzania (Spiritans were the first Catholic missionaries to arrive), the Sacrament of Confirmation and visits by choirs to neighboring churches. Other joint activities include youth revivals, seminars and workshops. The planning of and participation in these activities bring together the leaders and the faithful of both communities. The COVID-19 crisis has severely restricted our ability to carry out such activities but once the environment changes, we will resume them.

All of the above examples indicate that the church is much more than just one of many social/cultural institutions. The church unifies people in a divided society. It offers consolation and hope in the midst of despair. Liturgies offer welcome respite from the struggles of daily life. The Word of God shines light on the way forward to peace and reconciliation, and the Eucharist provides spiritual nourishment for the long and difficult journey. Engagement

of the members of our Small Christian Communities in addressing the overwhelming needs of their sick and suffering neighbors is essential. The church, in short, is the source of many healing graces.

Of utmost importance early on is to establish effective leadership to organize and conduct church functions that offer stability in a life that has been uprooted and upended. However, because the people come from different villages, towns and regions of their country of origin, they often don't know their new neighbors. One possibility is to elect an interim leadership according to their churches of origin to give them opportunity to choose leaders they know and trust.

LONG-TERM COMMITMENT IN THE FACE OF A PERMANENT STATE OF TRANSITION

The whole leadership structure of a refugee camp is oriented towards short term commitments. This is true of government officials and security forces, as well as the staff of the various UN and aid agencies. Six-month contracts are not unusual, while commitments of more than one or two years are. With the changes of personnel, as well as in the host country political environment, come changes in day-to-day policies and priorities. Similarly, when the refugees first arrive and when they begin returning home, church leadership itself is in a state of constant flux.

Over these past twenty-five years of ministry in the refugee camps, many Spiritans have contributed in important ways to our ability to offer essential pastoral services. But, without any diminishment of our gratitude to all who have participated in this ministry, long-term commitment, not only at the level of the Congregation as a whole, but of specific confreres assigned to refugee ministry is essential. It is essential in ensuring continuity in the church's pastoral services. It is essential in building the trust needed to address the underlying issues and dynamics that led to the flight of the refugees, as well as their ongoing effects in the daily life in exile. Therefore, special tribute is due to our confreres, beginning with Fr. Gervase Taratara, who have been anchors of stability in our ministry. Others include Br. Mariano Espinoza, Fr. Joachim Bilembo of the Province of DRC, and Fr. Deockary Massawe. The love and the concern that Fr. Daniel Waweru has for the people and ministry brings hope that he will follow in their footsteps.

Addressing Regional Issues Underlying Forced Displacement¹⁵

This section addresses the work of the Joint Commission for Refugees. In January 2002, a delegation from Burundi headed by Archbishop Simon Ntamwawa of Gitega diocese and a delegation of pastoral workers from the Tanzania refugee camps headed by Bishop Ruzoka met in Rulenge diocese. At that meeting the Joint Commission for Refugees (JCR) was formed under the leadership of Archbishop Ntamwana and Bishop Ruzoka. Bishop Joachim Ntahondereye of Muyinga diocese later replaced Archbishop Ntamwana as co-president of the JCR.

Under its mandate from the Burundian and Tanzanian Episcopal Conferences, JCR delegations began making cross-border visits to the refugee camps and settlements for the Burundians in Tanzania (mostly Hutu), as well as to settlements for the IDPs in Burundi (mostly Tutsi). The message to all was the same—let us work together for peace and reconciliation.¹⁶ Archbishop Ruzoka describes a JCR visit to Kirimbi Parish, Gitega, in September 2005 which brought together refugees who had returned from Tanzania, IDPs of the settlement of Bugendana, and those who had never fled their commune of Mwulire:

The atmosphere was tense and defensive at first; but it slowly changed [. . .] One thing that came up was [. . .] acknowledgement of having done something wrong to each other and they were ready to forgive and . . . start afresh in Christ. Sunday [. . .] we had an open-air Eucharistic Celebration at Mwulire [. . .] where they had lived together before as good neighbors. Archbishop Simon Ntamwana of Gitega was the main celebrant. During the service a mixed Hutu and Tutsi couple who had been forced to separate because of hostility based on ethnicity brought their infant child to be baptized which was a highly symbolic gesture of Christian reconciliation.¹⁷

15. See also Joint Commission for Refugees of the Burundi & Tanzania Episcopal Conferences (JCR), *The Presence of the Burundian Refugees in Western Tanzania: Ethical Responsibilities as a Framework for Advocacy*, in *Refugee Rights: Ethics, Advocacy and Africa*, ed. Hollenbach, S.J. David, Georgetown University Press, Washington, D.C., 2008, Kindle locations 848–854, & 1143–1150; and Archbishop Paul R. Ruzoka, “Experiences on the Pastoral Care of Refugees,” Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, *People on the Move*, N° 109, Suppl. (April 2009) 3–6.

16. *Ibid.*, Ruzoka, 3.

17. *Ibid.*

On behalf of the Tanzania Episcopal Conference, JCR prepared the booklet, *The Way Forward to Peace and Security, Good Governance and Development in The Great Lakes Region*. Included was the refugees' call for:

Representative and responsive political leaders and government institutions, and consistency and concern on the part of the international community in comprehensive efforts to protect the human rights of all citizens and to bring about an equitable sharing in the social and economic benefits of the nation.¹⁸

The JCR also advocated, on behalf of the refugees, for recognition of educational certificates received from the UNHCR in the camps, and participation in the Burundi national exams for graduating students to facilitate their continued education upon return to Burundi.¹⁹

As hundreds of thousands of Burundian refugees were returning to Burundi, the JCR's activities culminated in its work as one of the key organizers of the Conference of the Catholic Episcopate of the Great Lakes Region for Peace and Reconciliation held in Bujumbura, October 2010. It brought together delegates of the National Episcopal Conferences of Burundi, DRC, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda, as well as of the two regional Episcopal Conferences ACEAC and AMECEA, secular dignitaries, and representatives of partner agencies, like Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and the Catholic Peace Building Network (CPN) who, with JCR, were key actors in the organization and funding of the conference. The goal of the conference was to look for ways and means to work together to better contribute as church to peace building and to promote reconciliation in the Great Lakes Region (GLR.)

Playing an important role in the Catholic Peacebuilding Network (CPN,) was Fr. William Headley, CSSp, of the USA Province. In keeping with one of the main objectives of the conference, to strengthen the capacity of the Catholic Church in the GLR to promote peace and reconciliation through research, education and sharing of information, CPN later worked closely with ACEAC (Association of the Episcopal Conferences of Central Africa) in the opening

18. Booklet distributed to selected parties on the occasion of the UN/AU International Conference on Peace, Security and Development in the Great Lakes Region (Dar es Salaam: November 2004).

19. Op. Cit., JCR, Kindle locations 1010–1012.

of the Institute for Peace and Reconciliation at the Catholic University of Bukavu,²⁰ and in efforts of regional universities to promote peace studies and peacebuilding through the Association of Catholic Universities and Higher Institutes of Africa and Madagascar.

Conclusion

On behalf of all our confreres who have worked in this ministry, and especially on behalf of our faithful in the camps with whom we have worked over these past twenty-five years, I extend our deep gratitude for the prayers and support of the countless people and organizations that have made our ministry possible.

Outstanding among them is the US Spiritan Province which has very generously contributed to the upkeep and various needs of our mission from the beginning in the camps of Rulenge diocese. Similarly, the Bethany Foundation, set up by the late Harold Evans and which continued under the guidance of its former president, Collen Miller, until 2019, was extraordinarily generous in its donations for almost twenty years. The USA Spiritan Office for Mission Advancement (SOMA) secured funding for the construction of two of our churches in 2018, as well as for other needs over the years. Special thanks go also to the Spiritan European funding offices of Kibanda and CESS, who worked tirelessly in seeking funds for various projects, like our cars. Finally, our deep gratitude goes out to our Spiritan confreres, circumscriptions, as well as family members, friends and anonymous donors who have very graciously helped in supporting our ministry over these many years.

Please permit me to close with my profound gratitude to the refugees themselves for the many blessings we have received through them. Through



(L to R): Frs. Erasmus Manwa,
Daniel Waweru, Paul Flamm

20. William Headley, CSSp, Letter to Bishop Joachim Ntahondereye, Musinga Diocese, President of the Episcopal Conference of Burundi (Catholic Peace Building Network: Nov 30, 2017).

their extraordinary resilience, they have taught us that the true value of life does not lie in a person's material or even physical well-being. Instead, it is found in a deep faith in our loving and merciful God who is our constant companion wherever our life's journey takes us and in whatever conditions we find ourselves.

*Paul Flamm, CSSp
Nyarugusu, Kigoma, Tanzania*