

Witness of unity and reconciliation in Burundi

Jean Louis Nahimana

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Jean Louis Nahimana, a 57 yr. old priest from the African country of Burundi, died on January 7, 2021. He had been president of the National Commission for Truth and Reconciliation for four years and was esteemed by everyone during his life. An outpouring of messages from all sides followed his death, expressing gratitude for the Ubuntu and Christian values that characterized his life.

Jean Louis was born in 1964 in Rennes, France and was the son of a doctor and a nurse who were well known in Burundi during those years. In 1967, the family returned to Burundi. His father was imprisoned two years later and subsequently killed in 1972 because of the sociopolitical madness that plunged the country into mourning. In the years since the nation's independence in 1962, Burundi has experienced similar situations in an almost cyclical manner.

His origins in a deeply Christian family

Finding herself a widow when Jean Louis was only eight years old, his mother gave her eight children an inspired and passionate education that brought them to grow in love for God and neighbor. Jean-Louis Nahimana's vocation to the priesthood was born from this same education. He said: "In secondary school, which was very secular, I still kept the faith instilled in me by my mother. I remember in my third year of middle school, a group of us students went to ask the principal [...] for permission to celebrate Mass on Saturdays. The principal, also a practicing Catholic, agreed. We were happy."

Later, recalling the moment of his own vocational calling, he shared: "In my second year of high school, I went on a spiritual retreat in Gitega. I think it was then that "something" clicked in me. I discovered my vocation and wanted to become a priest. After high school, I applied to enter the seminary and, needless to say, my mother and the parish priest of our parish of St. Joseph were very happy. A new life was beginning for me."¹

Ordained a priest in 1992, Jean Louis held various positions in the Church and society and became well-known. He was first a parish priest in various parishes both in the city

and in the province. Since he enjoyed the trust of all, his bishop appointed him vicar general and thus Jean Louis became a point of reference for other priests. Later he was appointed head of the Diocesan Commission for Justice and Peace.

Encounter with the spirituality of unity

At age ten, Jean Louis encountered the spirituality of unity and began participating in various meetings of the Focolare Movement. It was in this atmosphere of the Gospel put into practice, that his vocation to the ministerial priesthood matured.

While participating in the priest school at Loppiano (Italy) for two months in 1995, he wrote to Focolare foundress Chiara Lubich: "I have been a priest for three years. I used to believe that the priesthood was my life's purpose. But I have understood that the priesthood in itself has no value if it does not become an instrument to help me to perfect myself in charity and love." In the same letter, he also recounted: "The daily morning and evening meditations helped me to discover God's love. They lit a new light that brought me to discover Jesus Forsaken and the place of pain in the divine economy. Through the sad, discouraged faces of the people in my homeland I discover the cry of Jesus on the cross, who asked the Father: 'Why have you forsaken me?'"

Jean Louis also spoke of a spiritual thought communicated by Chiara Lubich in one monthly global telephone link-up, in which she called each one to 'take action', saying: "This gave me the courage and strength to return to my country determined more than ever to 'take action', to love my suffering country, to love all our brothers and sisters in disarray, and to walk together on the path of unity, whose source is found in God's love."

In her response to his letter, Chiara Lubich wrote of her wish that Jean Louis could be "an instrument of God's love for all those he will meet in his ministry."

President of the National Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Burundi fell once again into civil war after the assassination of the first democratically elected president and his collaborators in 1993. It proved to be an even longer and harder moment of crisis in the country's dark history. Several rebel groups formed, and it would take many years before there was again a peace agreement. One point in this agreement provided for the creation of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It was tasked with revisiting the country's history in order to shed light on the crimes committed since its independence in 1962 and allow the country to identify the perpetrators of the violence that was cyclically committed in that period. This Commission was also tasked with both serving as a dispute arbitrator and fostering efforts that favored reconciliation.

In this context, Jean Louis was appointed, with the consent of all Burundian politicians, as the first president of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He worked in this role from 2014 to 2018 for a reconciled Burundi.

In an interview with a journalist from Radio France International, Jean Louis highlighted that various protagonists in Burundi were choosing to turn the page on violence, proposing a new project for society. But in order to do so, light must be shed on the country's painful past and the truth needed to first be established. In addressing those who were skeptical, he said: "I would like to say that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is not the prerogative of a small, established group of eleven commissioners. Rather the Commission exists to create a space that can help Burundians to speak. But the truth, and the desire for reconciliation, will come from the Burundians themselves."

Speaking of this experience on the Commission at a retreat for priests in January 2019, he shared: "It has been a true school for me, where one learns to listen to the suffering of the other in order to heal from your own." After describing the socio-political context in which his service took place, he concluded, saying: "To overcome this situation, I meditated, prayed and reflected a lot to find a common point that could serve as a link for the different communities. And I came to realize that this common point is suffering. It is suffering that unites the victims of different factions." Those four years of service were, he said, "with no other support except the person of Jesus Forsaken."

Re-examining Africa's colonial past

The light that emanated from him traveled worldwide. He was chosen as one of ten scientific experts to assist the Belgian parliament's Commission in dealing with Belgium's colonial past.

Upon his death, many expressed esteem for this priest who was a witness to unity, peace, and reconciliation. When there was a disagreement with someone, many people shared that Jean Louis Nahimana had been the first to call for calm and to find common ground. He would react with a smile before those who were angry, even gently teasing them and eventually arriving at the point where they laughed together.

"He didn't say much, but his words were very important. He listened to his interlocutor. And above all, he spoke with a certain frankness, even if the truth was uncomfortable. He had a wise way of saying things without beating around the bush," shared the priest who gave the funeral homily.

With the goal of helping the Burundian people to reconcile, he constantly reminded his compatriots that it is not wise to seek the truth to take revenge, but rather in order to reconcile. Only justice brings peace, he would say. He believed in a better world based on justice, and that human freedom is given to each one in order to choose good.

We conclude with the testimony of the focolarini in Bujumbura: "Msgr. Jean Louis Nahimana made the Focolare Movement's spirituality of unity his own and we will always remember his simplicity, generosity and acceptance of suffering without complaint. He was a brother, a friend and an example of a disciple of Christ for us. He passed the baton on to us in order to fulfill the dreams of a better world and of boundless love for the universal Church without forgetting the local one."

¹ Antoine Kaburahe, *In memoriam. Ainsi parlait Mrg Jean Louis Nahimana*, in Iwacu 20 January 2021, <https://www.iwacu-burundi.org>