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Priest who lived through it discusses background history, realities not portrayed in film about African genocide.

'Hotel Rwanda': How true?

By Annie DiBernardo, Miami

"Don't confuse a well-made movie for reality," says a Burundi priest who barely escaped the genocide in Rwanda.

Father Ernest Biriruka, currently serving as parochial vicar at Epiphany Parish in South Miami, spoke to about 200 guests of Florida International University's Campus Ministry after a "Faith and Film" presentation of the gripping movie, "Hotel Rwanda."

The film, which was nominated for three Academy Awards, was described by the New York Times as a political thriller. It portrayed the 1994 mass genocide in Rwanda, where, in a period of 100 days, almost 1 million people were brutally killed — one of the bloodiest chapters in recent African history.

After the film, Father Biriruka, who lived in the neighboring country of Burundi and was an eyewitness to the genocide, offered a deeper insight into the story behind the film. He explained that the genocides in Rwanda and Burundi stem from deep historical roots that date to long before colonial times.

"Genocide does not just explode like out of nowhere; rather it simmers for a long time, like a fire underneath the wood, and then it bursts into flames."

Ethnic resentments

When Belgium took over German-governed Rwanda-Burundi in 1918, it created an even deeper chasm among the ethnic groups that lived in the country — the Hutu, the Tutsi and the Twa — which the film omitted. Although the Rwandan and Burundi population is made up of about 85 percent Hutu, 13 percent Tutsi, 1 percent Twa

(Pygmies) and another 1 percent foreigners, it was the Tutsi population that was favored by the Belgians.

Father Biriruka, who is a Hutu, explained that the Tutsi were considered master warriors and they were able to impose themselves on the Hutu. The Tutsi were predominately the ruling class, owners of the land and cattle, and they imposed a feudal regime. In Burundi, the Tutsi were considered the superior class and exposed to education. This sort of discrimination fostered resentment.

"Hotel Rwanda" begins on April 6, 1994, when President Jevanal Habyarimana of Rwanda and President Cyprien Ntaryamira of Burundi, both Hutus, are killed when their plane is shot down — presumably by Tutsi militias. That same evening the genocide against the Tutsi began.

The film focused on the real-life heroism of Paul Rusesabagina, the manager of the five-star Milles Collines Hotel in Kigali, Rwanda's capital city. Rusesabagina, a Hutu, with the help of his wife, Tatiana, a Tutsi, used his position to help others by arranging for the survival of everyone who came to the hotel.

Risked his life

Like Rusesabagina, Father Biriruka also risked his life to rescue people. While he lived in his native country of Burundi, he participated in many meetings with the local authorities and at other times spoke to the population about peace and relief services. He saved both Hutu and Tutsi and was persecuted in his own country for speaking out about the genocide.

"But in those situations, one does not just exercise official functions, but truly tries to live God's love and compassion. Actually, one of my favorite Scripture verses is 'God is love.' So I felt very much compelled to help anybody who was in a dangerous situation. As Hutu, the Burundians who came to me for some type of protection were mostly Hutu. I hid eight people in a wing of the bishop's house for weeks before I could evacuate them to a safer area, which later became reason for personal persecution by the Tutsi militias," said Father Biriruka.

Father Biriruka also hid many students who were being pursued. While trying to find a suitable hiding place, he needed to go with them in the completely dark night, never knowing whether or not they would be caught in the middle of a crossfire or fall into an ambush. But he risked his life and went for the sake of the youths.

"Coming back walking alone in the dark was even scarier, but God gave me strength to overcome my fears. On various occasions I had to evacuate people who were in danger, taking them to a safer area. God's providence was watching over me because when I look back now, there is nothing which guaranteed security on the road but God's hand. I could have been killed at any time," Father Biriruka said.

He added, "At the beginning, I would not sleep in my bed, because of gunshots all around us and I would lay on my bed with my track-training suit and running shoes on, ready to run, I do not know where. There was a lot of fear. Yet during the day, I would go to help whomever I could and gave food and relief necessities to the people."

"So my faith experience is that God saved me from all the ambushes and dangers even when I could not gauge how imminent they could be," Father Biriruka said. "For instance, the week I left (the last week of June 1995) I knew I was in grave danger, but I did not know a group of four militias had already been assigned to kill me. They kept watching for my return from Bujumbura where I was supposed to have gone to run errands, but that fateful week I left Burundi."

Questions about humanity

"The genocide in Rwanda raises fundamental questions, some about God, others about humanity, ... (about) those who committed genocide, or others who failed to do whatever they could do to prevent or stop it," Father Biriruka said.

Without minimizing the responsibility of the Hutu government and militia in Rwanda for their crimes against humanity, he pointed out that both Hutu and Tutsi were guilty of killing.

"Objectively speaking about these situations of Rwanda and Burundi, there is not one group who is completely innocent," Father Biriruka said.

He encouraged his listeners to consult independent reports such as those of Amnesty International and other human rights organizations. He also explained that life is still unsettled in Rwanda. While it is not as bad as it was, there are still political extremists.

Problems that date back centuries will not be solved overnight, he said, noting other genocides that have occurred recently in the Great Lakes Region of Africa involving Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and the Republic of Congo.

'Humanity still possible'

"Despite the general indifference of the West and the barbarity of the Hutu, the movie precisely shows also a Hutu with a heart of gold, Paul Rusesabagina," Father Biriruka said. "Friendship and even intermarriage are possible."

He also praised the heroic intervention of Lt. Gen. Romeo Dallaire, Canadian leader of the United Nations' peacekeeping force, of humanitarian missionaries and journalists and many other individuals who saved lives regardless of color or ethnic group.

"All demonstrate that humanity is still alive. So it is understandable that a movie could not bring all the aspects of the situation into the screen," Father Biriruka said. "Let us emphasize this with all our strength, that there is no reason that is good enough to justify genocide; none and never. In any case, one should not be so naive as to think that in a war only one side kills and the other does not."

While the film did not portray the history behind the evolution of the genocide, it did expose the lack of cooperation among the international community, which has been accused by some critics of viewing the genocide as just another Third World country incident not worthy of attention.

According to William Harvelle, FIU campus minister, who selected the film precisely because of its controversial content, "Hotel Rwanda" illustrates that one of the gravest sins one can commit is the sin of omission.

"The movie should shock and frighten — it is murder committed by one's own neighbor," Harvelle said.

Back to Top

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