

A vocation to save life

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Christianity has a long tradition of encouraging people to meditate on the lives of the saints. That tradition has foundered somewhat in this egalitarian age, in which we resist the notion that some lives are worthy of emulation. We have also been schooled by modern journalism and psychology to suspect that virtue is never unblemished. Beneath heroic accomplishment must lie private vice, or at least an aberrant personality.

Yet, as previous generations understood, stories of the saints are needed to show us the kind of life it is possible to lead. Perhaps in our time more than ever, we need stories of how particular lives of virtue and faith can take shape.

A modern version of the lives of the saints might well include the story of Matthew Lukwiya of Uganda. He was a hero in last year's effort to contain the highly infectious and terrifyingly deadly Ebola virus, and he lost his own life in the process. The story of his heroism was widely told in Britain and elsewhere in December, but it made little impact in most U.S. media. A moving account recently appeared in the *New York Times Magazine* (February 18).

Lukwiya was the medical doctor in charge of St. Mary's Hospital, a Catholic mission in Gula. Though the hospital is situated in the poor northern sector of the country, which has been seared by guerrilla fighting, Lukwiya had helped make it one of the best in East Africa. *Times* writer Blaine Harden reports that Lukwiya was a "soft-spoken, deeply religious man" (an evangelical Christian), who was generous to his relatives, inspiring to his staff, and fiercely devoted to his hospital.

He was also a brilliant doctor, with an outstanding academic record and a degree from the School of Tropical Medicine in Liverpool, England. He could easily have made a career for himself outside Africa. But he wanted only to return to his country and the work at St. Mary's.

When Ebola broke out in northern Uganda last November, St. Mary's was at the center of the response. Twelve health-care workers died from the virus, which

causes massive internal hemorrhaging. Lukwiya was faced with a panicked staff and the prospect that his beloved hospital would be forced to shut down. By persuasion, and the power of his own example, he was able to keep the staff working. And by isolating patients in the hospital and imposing strict procedures for their care, Lukwiya was able to contain the epidemic. Yet in an impulsive gesture that violated his own guidelines, he neglected to put on a face shield before caring for a coughing and bleeding patient. He was infected, and died two weeks later.

Lukwiya's actions speak more powerfully than any words about selflessness and love of neighbor. But he also left some words behind which deserve to be part of the life of this saint. Harden reports that at the funeral of a nun who died of Ebola, Lukwiya explained his philosophy of care: "It is our vocation to save life. It involves risk, but when we serve with love, that is when the risk does not matter so much. When we believe our mission is to save lives, we have got to do our work."