Secret of Nyamirambo: A haven in Rwanda

by L. Gregory Jones in the December 13, 2005 issue

Visiting the National Genocide Memorial in Kigali, Rwanda, was overwhelming. It is the grave of 250,000 people killed in the 1994 genocide. I walked with some students through the memorial, watching the videos, studying the exhibits and reading the stories. We found it difficult to absorb the immensity of the killing as well as the intensity of the violence and vengeance between Hutus and Tutsis, which left 800,000 dead. Our host noted that in 1990 Rwanda was described as a Christian country, with approximately 90 percent of the people identifying themselves as Christians.

The next morning we took a bus to a small Muslim community in a village called Nyamirambo. Our host said, “This is the only area in Rwanda that didn’t experience the genocide at all.”

“Why is that?” a student asked.

“Because their identity as Muslims is so fundamental, so important to them, that they could not envision killing one another. Their commitment to Allah created their fundamental identity, more important than any tribal or national identity.”

We felt ashamed. A small Muslim community, a minority of the population, had not only refused to become complicit in the genocide, but also served as a refuge for others.

We visited churches that were the sites of massacres (sometimes with the complicity of pastors and priests), and learned that more people were killed in churches than anywhere else. Yes, we also learned of heroic actions by some pastors, priests and laypeople. There were stories of individuals risking their lives, and of pastors moving people from one safe house to another.

Even so, we could not shake the memory of the visit to Nyamirambo. Why did the Muslim community recognize the fundamental commitment of its members’ religious

faith, while the Christian commitment was so spotty? At least part of the answer is a sociological phenomenon: a minority group is more likely to inspire intense internal identification as a way of distinguishing itself from the majority culture. Further, Nyamirambo's geographical location in a tightly knit neighborhood reinforced that sense of identification.

Yet we could not avoid concluding that there had been an ecclesiological failure on the part of the church, namely a failure to catechize Christian believers so that they would have recognized that their identity as Christians—their baptism in Christ—had fundamentally altered their identity. They should no longer have been primarily Hutu or Tutsi, for they had become united in Christ Jesus. Or had they?

What would it mean for Christians, in Rwanda or in the United States or anywhere else, to take our identity in Christ as the primary defining character of our lives—relativizing all other loyalties? What if, for example, we adopted the Mennonite Central Committee's Modest Proposal for Peace: "Let the Christians of the world agree that they will not kill each other." How would we then envision our identities, our lives, our relationships and commitments?

We would need to cultivate an ecclesiology in which the material lives and identities of Christians matter, similar to the argument William Cavanaugh proposes in his study of Pinochet's Chile, *Torture and Eucharist*. We would need more robust catechesis for discipleship, both in preparation for baptism and for learning to live into that baptism.

In the United States, we would have to get over our tendency—especially in mainline Protestantism—to approach baptism sentimentally. I have been asked by a stranger unrelated to the church, "Can we get our baby done?" as if baptism is little more than a sacred prophylactic or the necessary prelude to a party celebrating the child's birth.

When my wife, Susan, was serving as pastor of a congregation, a church member asked her to baptize her grandchild. Susan learned that the baby had already been dedicated in the Baptist church of the other set of grandparents. The grandmother wanted another service, this one in *her* backyard. (The child's parents did not attend any church.) If this is all that baptism represents, would it be any surprise if the child were raised to think that having been baptized was relatively unimportant?

In an increasingly post-Christendom culture, Christians in the United States have an opportunity and a responsibility to recover a robust catechetical approach to baptism and discipleship. It is an opportunity because many people are curious about what would be involved in becoming Christian. And it is a responsibility for us to bear witness to and with them about the life-transforming, life-giving character of Christian discipleship.

A few weeks ago, a divinity student was reflecting on her life and her vocation. This remarkably gifted and talented young woman described her conversion and sense of calling to become a minister. Since her parents are secularists with no interest in the church, she did not attend church until she went on her own as a teenager. She indicated that although her parents are supportive of her in many ways, they cannot comprehend why she would seek ordination. She said, “The waters of baptism have to run deeper than the blood of family ties or it just doesn’t make any sense for me to be here in divinity school.”

For her sake, for the sake of Rwandans recovering from the genocide, and for the sake of Christian witness in communities near and far, I hope she’s right.