
THE DRAMA AND THE WITNESS OF YOUNG CAMILLIAN MISSIONARY HEROES

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'As they murderous militia drew near, Harouna just closed her eyes and wondered how she would die: killed by a bullet or a machete?': Testimony of Fr. Bernard Kinvi.

'Faced with threats to murder a boy aged thirteen, he said: "If you want to kill him, kill me first"...and if by chance I am killed, tell my mother that I died happy': Testimony of Fr. Bernard Kinvi.

'At a certain point more than 1,500 Muslims lived under the protection of a man whose only strength was his faith and a black cassock with a large red cross on the front, given that he was a member of the Camillian Order': The Guardian, Sam Jones, 3.11.2014.

In this new season of the Church inaugurated by Pope Francis, and in the search for the revitalisation of consecrated life with the celebration of the Year of Consecrated Life (2015), we are invited to engage in a *personal exodus* and to move towards those who live *on the geographical and existential outskirts of the human heart*.

It is in this sense that I would like to describe the work during the civil war that recently broke out in the Central African Republic engaged in by Fr. Bernard Kinvi and by Fr. Brice Patrick Nainangue, the animators of the Camillian mission of Bossemptele which is a part of the Camillian Vice-Province of Benin-Togo.

We are faced with a terrible and dramatic reality! Our religious saved the lives of thousands of Muslims, risking their own lives. During these times of religious pluralism, when the need for inter-religious dialogue is discussed, our religious brothers are offering us a magnificent example.

Father Bernard Kinvi is the director of the John Paul II hospital of Bossemptele. During these clashes, this hospital – which is funded by the NGO of the Order 'Health and Development', a body which exists to promote various social/health-care services – the parish church and the school of the sisters of St. Teresa of Turin were the settings for the saving of hundreds of Muslim refugees who were fleeing from the civil war.

Father Bernard Kinvi, for this courageous action in defence of the lives of over 1,500 Muslims, received the international prize of the organisation 'Human Rights Watch' (HRW). In the months of November and December 2014 he took part in the series of events organised in Paris, London, Rome and Geneva where he was awarded the prestigious Alison Forges Award in recognition of his work and that of the Camillian community.

Father Kinvi also spent some days in the our generalate house in Rome, telling us about his experiences before a very interested audience. I believe that it is incumbent upon me to publicise and explain this event within our Order and not only through our system of internal communication, the web site *www.camilliani.org* and *Newsletter*. I think it is also useful to engage in reflection on these facts and to subject them to further analysis. I thought about this text and wrote about it starting from the writings transmitted to the wider public by journalists and by the great international secular press – a true hymn of respect and appreciation for the human rights of hundreds of thousands of people involved in the violent civil war that broke out in the Central African Republic.

Some Data on the Central African Republic

Located in the heart of the continent of Africa, the Central African Republic (CAR) is a former colony of France and became independent in 1960. Bangui, the capital, is the largest city of the country and has 701,597 inhabitants. It is one of the fifty-four nations that make up the continent of Africa and is one of the poorest countries in the world. It has about five million inhabitants (4.6 million in 2012), with a 44.8% literacy rate, an infant mortality rate of 11%, and an average life expectancy of only forty-eight

years – one of the lowest in the world. The index of human development (IHD) is 0.343 and this places this country amongst the last in the world. Worse than the Central African Republic are countries such as Sierra Leone, Burkina Faso, Liberia, Chad, Mozambique, Burundi, Niger and the Congo, all of which are to be found in the continent of Africa. In terms of religious affiliations, Christians make up 66% of the population (Catholics: 20.4%; independents: 18%; Protestants: 15.1%); those adhering to traditional beliefs and animism make up 15.4%; and Muslims constitute the remaining 14.6%.

The CAR is a country in which various genocidal conflicts have taken place between the Islamic forces, the *Selekà* (which in *Sango* – the official language of the country – means *pact*) and the radical anti-*Balakà* Christian militias. These conflicts came about after the rise to power of the *Christian* President, François Bozizé in 2013 who was opposed by the Muslim candidate Michel Djotodia. A bloody struggle began and led to an authentic ethnic genocide from March 2013 to January 2014. A systematic campaign of persecution against the Christians was organised and their churches were destroyed. The anti-*Balakà* militias, composed in large part of animists and Christians, at the outset organised themselves for their own legitimate self-defence but they then began to act out of revenge and attacked mosques and expelled Muslims from their houses, killing thousands of people. The Catholic hierarchy of the country publicly dissociated itself from the anti-*Balakà* and denounced the brutal violation of human rights by both sides.

These two rival factions were engaged in a bloody struggle which brought about hundreds of deaths and generated hundreds of thousands of refugees who were forced to leave their towns, villages and homes and to flee to safer areas in neighbouring countries, above all Cameroon. According to the reports of the international humanitarian organisations, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch (HRW), what took place was a *brutal action of ethnic cleansing*.

The valuable natural resources – for example diamonds and uranium – of the CAR were plundered. Chaos broke out when the *Selekà* Islamic Front took power in March 2011 in a country which has a Christian majority. There were three thousand deaths and about two and half million people – about a half of the population of the country – found themselves in a terrible situation with an absolute need for humanitarian aid in order to survive.

In the view of Peter Bouckaert, the coordinator of the emergency initiatives of Human Rights Watch (HRW), ‘the peace workers had to deal with a difficult mission in the CAR. Fundamentally, government in most of the country did not exist. There was an absolute need to restore law and order in a country which is as large as France and had an army of only twelve thousand men’.

The International Prize for the Young Fr. Bernard Kinvi

It is in the context of this bloody and violent civil war that the young Camillian religious Fr. Bernard Kinvi, aged thirty-two, entered the scene, described by CNN as ‘a living symbol of hope for the future of the country (the CAR)’. The reporter of CNN, Cristiane Amanpour, asked Peter Bouckaert if there was still any hope for the CAR. He answered in the affirmative: ‘because of the presence of many people like him (Fr. Bernard Kinvi: editor’s note) we are able to make all the difference. Those who have died are talked about a great deal but let us not forget the large number of people who were saved by courageous actions, as was the case with Fr. Kinvi. It is urgently important that the killing stops and the wounds begin to be healed’.

The attention of the international press concentrated on Fr. Bernard Kinvi because of the prize he received but we cannot forget that the award was given to the entire Camillian community, with the participation of Fr. Patrick Brice Nainangue. Fr. Kinvi himself has emphasised the involvement of the whole of the Camillian religious community.

Fr. Bernard Kinvi was born in Togo and entered a Camillian seminary when he was sixteen. His choice of the religious life according to the Camillian charism developed while he was taking care of his sick father who was dying. This personal experience greatly sensitised him to the suffering of other people. After his ordination as a priest, he was sent to the CAR in mission to a small city called Bossemptele which is about 300 kilometres from the capital. His task and responsibility was to offer welcome and care in the hospital, in the parish church and in the school (which belonged to the Carmelite sisters) to hundreds of Muslims whose lives were gravely endangered and threatened by the anti-*Balakà* militias.

In the Camillian missionary centre he provided protection to 1,500 Muslims, helping them to find

refuge in safe places, above all in Cameroon. The international peace-keeping forces were in practice only present and active in Bangui, the capital of the country, leaving all the other areas completely unprotected and exposed to *ethnic extermination*. The only peace-keeping forces and the only people offering support to those in need and the wounded were the Catholic priests and religious.

According to the international organisation Human Rights Watch, after one of the bloodiest attacks that had hitherto taken place in Bossemptele, where the anti-*Balakà* militias killed more than eighty Muslims, 'Kinvi spent whole days looking for Muslim survivors, many of whom were children, in order to take them to the church which was the safest place. During the course of the conflict, he put hundreds of Muslims in the church, in the hospital and in the school, despite the repeated death threats'.

According to Fr. Bernard Kinvi, this involvement of his in helping Muslim refugees 'was not a personal decision but something that just happened. As a priest I could not accept the death of a man. We are all human beings: religion has got nothing to do with it. If an anti-*Balakà* was wounded I take care of him. It does not matter who you are, what your job is or what your religion is: you are a human being and I will take care of you'.

Peter Bouckaert, the director for emergency situations of Human Rights Watch, in an article published in the prestigious newspaper *The Washington Post* (15 March 2014) explained why the organisation had awarded the prestigious Alison Des Forges Award 2014 to Fr. Kinvi: 'During the bloodbath in the CAR, Fr. Kinvi risked his life day after day to save hundreds of Muslims from certain death at the hands of the murderers. Demonstrating humble and determined courage, and always with a contagious smile, he defended the most vulnerable'.

Human Rights Watch declared that it wanted to pay tribute to Fr. Bernard Kinvi for his courage and his iron devotion in protecting defenceless civilians in the CAR. 'This prize celebrates the value of people who have placed their lives at risk to protect the dignity and the rights of other people. Human Rights Watch works with these courageous activists to create a world in which people can live safely without violence, discrimination and oppression'.

The prize is named after Dr. Alison Des Forges who was an adviser to Human Rights Watch for almost twenty years and who died in an aeroplane crash in the United States of America in 2009. She became famous at an international level as the greatest expert on human rights in Ruanda and for her involvement in favour of human rights during the genocide which took place in that country in 1994. In addition to the Camillian religious Fr. Bernard Kinvi, three other people received this prize in 2014 because of their exceptional engagement for human rights: *Shin Dong-Hyuk* (North Korea), who experienced brutality and hunger in a forced labour camp in his country and worked tirelessly to warn the world about these horrors after he fled from a concentration camp in 2005; *Arwa Othman* (Yemen), a lawyer, who works to put an end to the exploitation of children and the promotion of women in Yemen; and *M.R. Rajagopal*, an Indian medical doctor who for over twenty years has dedicated himself to palliative care and has relieved the pain of patients about to die in order to achieve their dignified deaths. His organisation, *Pallium India*, played a key role in convincing the Indian government to make morphine available to patients for the treatment of pain during the terminal stage of their lives.

He is not Afraid of Risking his Own Life

Some of the most interesting and engaging interviews given by Fr. Bernard Kinvi to various international TV channels were quoted by some of the most prestigious British (*The Independent* and *The Guardian*), European and North American (*USA Today*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*) newspapers. In addition there was as a fine interview given to CNN International by Fr. Kinvi and by Peter Bouckaert, the coordinator for emergencies of Human Rights Watch. The global impact on the so-called secular press was simply sensational.

In an interview with CNN, the journalist Cristiane Amanpour asked for a description of what happened when the anti-*Balakà* militias arrived in his village of Bossemptele. Fr. Kinvi described the situation in the following way: 'When we realised that the anti-*Balakà* militias were arriving I tried to negotiate in order to stop the armed confrontation but they did not listen to us and unfortunately the worst happened. Many Muslims were killed, others went into hiding, other managed to flee and others went into our hospital. Many hid in the forest and those who did not manage to flee the conflict unfortunately were all killed! There was a real massacre. I went to find the children, the people who had gone into hiding, the

disabled and the wounded and I took them all to the hospital. They wanted to kill a thirteen-year-old boy. He was terrorised by fear and hung on to my religious habit. They thought that this boy when he had become an adult would have taken his revenge on them. Thus for them it was a good idea to kill him immediately! I intervened very strongly and said that he was a human being. If they wanted to kill him they had to shoot me first! In the end, they stopped and allowed me to take the boy with me’.

The daily newspaper *The Independent* described what Father Kinvi did in the following way: ‘For more than a month he dealt with the anti-*Balakà* fighters (a group of Christians and animists), many of whom were drunk and under the influence of drugs, collecting bodies in the streets and the outskirts of the town. Dressed in a black habit with the red cross of his Order he negotiated every day with the militiamen in order to save an increasing number of lives, including his own’.

The coldness with which the leaders of the armed militias behaved is spine-chilling. Fr. Kinvi received numerous telephone calls from these murderers who told him that another Muslim had been killed and asked him to bury the body. Fr. Kinvi went on and said: ‘at a certain point I buried twenty-eight corpses in a common grave, The bodies had been left to rot in the streets...in that heat. The smell was unbearable’. In some cases, all that he could do was simply to assure that those corpses were treated with a certain dignity.

In this country there is a cultural belief that nobody should touch a corpse because of the superstition that the person will die in the same way if he does so. Thus bodies remained for days along very bad roads and there was a terrible smell. Fr. Kinvi spent almost fifteen days collecting up the bodies and burying them. ‘On the first day we buried twenty-one bodies. We took the bodies to the cemetery and the people we asked to help us began to offer excuses and abandoned us. There was almost nobody willing to work with us to bury the bodies’ (Jon Lee Anderson, ‘The Mission: a Last Defense Against Genocide’, *The New Yorker*, October 2014).

Fr. Kinvi confessed ‘I had moments of very great terror! But I had taken a vow to help the sick even if my own life was endangered and when the moment came I had no choice but to stay and help’.

An important weapon for Fr. Kinvi was his religious habit which he wore with great authority and respect and which forced people to ask themselves about its meaning. ‘From the outset they showed a certain fear about, and admiration for, my Camillian cassock. Even in the situation of anarchy of the armed militias of the anti-*Balakà*, whose members use voodoo rites which according to their beliefs and rites make them invincible, the symbols of the Church are respected. I believe that my long black habit with a red cross on the chest made an impression on them. After understanding this, I have always worn my religious cassock because it is my protection’.

‘Thanks to him and his religious brothers, members of the Camillian Order, more than a thousand Muslims in Bossemptele and nearby areas were saved and helped as refugees to reach safety in the direction of Cameroon. His heroism was learnt about by everybody after the humanitarian organisation Human Rights Watch investigated this genocide’ (*The Independent*, 13 November 2014).

Fr. Kinvi spoke about his commitment to life: ‘When I became a Camillian religious I took on the responsibility of serving the sick, even when this endangered my own life. I took on this commitment to life without knowing what it meant. But when the war broke out I meant what risking one’s own life means. Being a priest is much more than a mere distribution of blessings: it is knowing how to be with those who have lost everything’ (*International Business Times*, 14 November 2014).

‘I long for peace for our country. I want to see people free, able to go from one place to another in safety, as happens in every other country. I want to see my Muslim brothers who have lost everything go back to their homes. This is their country and they need to go back to their homes’, was F. Kinvi’s final statement.

Today, according to *The Independent* there are few Muslims in Bossemptele: it is estimated that of the 700,000 Muslims who were in the country to begin with, less than 100,000 are still to be found in the Central African Republic. More than half a million have the status of refugees in other countries, for the most part in Cameroon.

A Dramatic Scene: at Times even the Wicked have some Feelings of Compassion!

In the month of March 2014, the African peace-keeping force began to evacuate the Muslims from Bossemptele and today, as a result, in the mission very few have remained. Amongst them there is

Harouna, a ten-year-old girl with polio. She was abandoned by her mother when the anti-*Balakà* squads arrived in the place where they lived. Harouna, who cannot walk, would probably have died if her fourteen-year-old brother had not saved her by carrying her on his shoulders and fleeing into the forest.

He took her and carried her to a safe place – in so much as such a thing is possible in those conditions – but after going off to look for help he never came back...when the anti-*Balakà* with their weapons found her a few days later while she was crawling among the trees they thought jokingly that they had found an animal!...As they drew near she closed her eyes and wondered how she would die: killed by a bullet or a machete? To the great and unexpected surprise of Harouna, the armed militia felt *compassion* for her, did not kill her and began to take care of her, offering her a bathroom, food and transport at the parish centre. After staying for five months in the nearby parish, Harouna was taken to Bossemptele where she is now a student and waiting for a wheelchair. ‘Acts of compassion such as this are proof that love is contagious’, observed Fr. Kinvi (Sam Jones, *The Guardian*, 13 November 2014).

An Extraordinary Witness to Life...

The journalist Sam Jones of the daily newspaper *The Guardian* summarised the story of Fr. Kinvi in the following way: ‘At a certain point (in the conflict) more than 1,500 Muslims lived under the protection of a man whose only strength was his faith and a black cassock with a large red cross on the front, given that he was a member of the Camillian Order’ (Sam Jones, *The Guardian*, 3 November 2014).

Let us end this story by offering a passage from the direct testimony of this young Camillian when – during a critical moment of the armed conflict – he asked his family to be informed: ‘One one occasion I telephoned my older brother and I told him that the situation was very difficult and dangerous and that my own life was also in danger. I confided to him that if I were to be killed he was to tell my mother that I died happy’.

After all these testimonies what should one think? What should one say? First of all I think that we should express our admiration, respect and gratitude to these Camillian religious brothers of ours for the determination with which they have continued to bear witness to their Camillian vocation and mission, saving human lives in a violent context of war, even at the risk of losing their own lives. They received an international prize that was then talked about by the secular mass media (without a religious orientation: another interesting fact that should be observed) in the great areopagus of modern society.

Let us pray to the Lord and St. Camillus our father to protect this Camillian mission so that it may continue with commitment, for many years, its offering of support and solidarity to these peoples who are very frail and in need of help! We may ask ourselves: what can we specifically do for this Camillian mission, apart from praying for and encouraging these religious brothers of ours?

We should not turn out the lights of the celebratory year of the fourth centenary of the death of St. Camillus: among the very many initiatives organised within the context of world Camillian geography, which also included some failed projects, we are called to read this unknown history as *a sign of God*, in reality an unexpected and unforeseen present from the outskirts of the planet which placed the Camillians and their historic red cross at the centre of international attention. In addition, we have before us a heroic form of living our charism which asks us to move out of our *comfort zone* in order to engage in a personal *exodus* and ‘go towards those who are in the geographical and existential outskirts of the human heart’ (Papa Francis).

What else can one say except *thank you* for the extraordinary witness of this African Camillian community through Fr. Bernard Kinvi and Fr. Patrick Brice Nainangué? Deeply moved, I can say simply: *Amen!*

World Peace Day

San Paolo (Brazil), 1 January 2015

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