FOUNDATION Rwanda

This is the testimony of Philomena, a survivor of the Rwandan genocide

When the genocide started, I was thirteen and in the first grade of secondary school.

We had a small bar, and my father was having a drink with friends, when all of a sudden, there was a big blast. People were wondering, is it thunder? Is it rain? A gun?

We later heard the news that the president of Rwanda's plane had crashed and both he and the president of Burundi were dead. We kept the radio on, tuning into Radio Rwanda, and all we could hear was classical music, slow songs, as if it were a mourning period.

We stayed inside for some days until the militia came. They killed my father, and I knew they were going to kill my brother too. They had my mother and sister in the sitting room. They said, "We are going to have sex with you." I said "Can you please wait? After the war, I will be your wife. You can take your time." One of them said, "Who said you will still be alive when the war ends?" I kept pleading that I was a virgin. So he said, "If you are such a coward, let me show you something about it." They removed all of my mother's clothes and raped her. I looked away, but he said, "No, look here and be prepared because I want you to see how it is done. And then after this, we will come to you." They closed the door and raped my mother, one man after another. Then they raped my elder sister. Then they raped me. Later, they took me to one of their militia headquarters, where I stayed for two months.

Our life, our routine was eighty percent sex and twenty percent cooking food. We stayed on the ground floor, while the guns and weapons were upstairs. After their meetings, if a man wanted sex, he came to us. Whoever he wanted that day, he would have.

When we heard there was no more fighting, I said to myself, “Let’s go and try to get home.” My elder sister was there, but my mother was in Gitarama. When she returned, she said I looked pregnant. At that time, we were free to abort a child of a militiaman. But my mother said, “No, I am Christian. I can’t allow you to kill. Just bear with it. It will be your child, and you will love it later.”

Today, I have a big challenge: I am a mother but feel unwilling to be a mother. I don’t love this child. Whenever I look at this child, the memories of rape return. Whenever I look at her, I imagine those men holding my legs open. I understand that she is innocent, and I try to love her, but I fail. I don’t love her like a mother ought to love her child. I don’t see a future for her. I have asked God to forgive me. Maybe, with time, I will love this daughter of mine. But for now, no. Sometimes, I regret not aborting; other times, because she is the only daughter I am going to have in my life, I don’t regret it. For a long time, I really hated God. I asked myself, why did people die? Why did my family die? Why this extreme violence? Why am I HIV positive? Where was God? Why did he let it happen?

Today’s Reading of the Testimonies marks the 15th Anniversary of the Rwandan genocide, in support of survivors like Philomena.