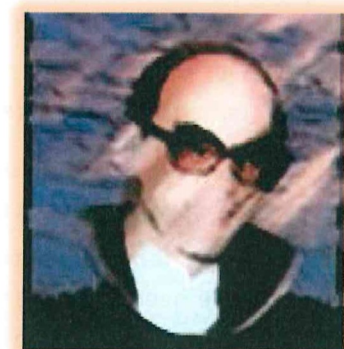


A tribute to commitment:
Nymirangwe / Bugobe 1995-96



JeffCrowe,

May 2001 (Revised October 31, 2018)

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On October 31, 1996, four Brothers were killed at Bugobe, eastern Congo (then Zaire). They had been working in a nearby refugee camp. Their presence in the camp was applauded but controversial for some — too risky, abetting those responsible for genocide. Their death was shocking but, for some totally unnecessary, if only due precautions had been taken. So much grief and rage, so much disbelief ...

The thoughts that follow are no assessment of this momentous event. They attempt to capture for posterity something precious, totally extraordinary in our Marist history.

Honour and dishonour, praise and blame, are alike our lot: we are the impostors who speak the truth, the unknown men whom all men know; dying, we still live on; disciplined by suffering, we are not done to death; in our sorrows we have always cause for joy; poor ourselves, we bring wealth to many; penniless, we own the world.

We have opened our hearts wide to you all ... open wide your hearts to us.

(2 Cor 6: 8-13)

This discernment meant, for most of the Brothers, returning to Rwanda to begin again — to pick up the pieces of shattered lives, to be brothers among their people in their time of need.

For six Brothers, it meant returning immediately to east Congo to minister among the refugees. They decided on Nymirangwe as this camp held people from the countryside, was the least politicised, a fair distance from the town of Bukavu, and with no established community organisation. This camp of some 30,000 people was administered by the Red Cross in the name of the United Nations Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). A hill-top had been cleared and a maze of blue sheeting tent structures erected on the bare earth. When it rained, as it often did, the alleyways became rivers of red mud.

The Brothers considered setting up house next to the camp but could get no approval from the authorities. This was fortunate since they would have quickly been entangled in the petty politics of camp life and have been a 24-hour service stop for all and sundry. Just 3 kilometres away was a parish out-station, Bugobe, and the bishop allowed them to establish themselves there.

Everything had to be constructed: house, school, a 'convent' for a group of Rwandan 'Sisters' who decided to come when the Brothers moved there. The external walls of all these buildings were of rough sawn timber. Plastic sheeting served as room dividers. A light concrete base was the floor. Water had to be drawn from a well a kilometre away, carried in large plastic jerry-cans strapped to sturdy backs, and stored in 200-litre drums. Life was rough, but a step above that in the camp.

As months passed the project took shape: to assist the Basic Christian Community of Nyamirangwe in its social and pastoral outreach, including the basic education of the children and youth. Besides the 'secondary school' of 800 operating at Bugobe, there was a 'pre-school' of over 1,000 youngsters, and 'primary classes' for 3,000 operating in the open air in fields around the camp. There were non-formal education activities of adult literacy, tailoring for the young women, university discussion groups. A number of youth groups, mainly of a Church character, were supported and animated. Sport and leisure activities were encouraged.

Gradually, it became clear that the precarious conditions were taking their toll of the health of the Brothers, as well as the continuous uncertainty over the future of the camp, the general climate of frustration and warmongering, and genuine concern for their security as they moved to and from Bukavu. With the Brothers, the Superior General made a decision to invite international participation in the community.

Servando Mayor, 44, then holding an important position in his Province of Bética in Spain, immediately volunteered and was accepted. Miguel Angel Isla, 53, Spanish by birth but a long-term missionary in Argentina and Ivory Coast, also volunteered. He brought fluency in French and experience in living and working in Africa. They joined the community around September 1995.

Progressively the Rwandan Brothers withdrew. There was an urgent need for at least one other to strengthen the community and so Fernando de la Fuente, 53, from Chile, who had previously volunteered, was invited and immediately accepted. He arrived in January 1996. Forces were still stretched thin, particularly in terms of allowing people to take breaks. So, Julio Rodriguez, 40, who as working at this time in Goma, about 150 km away, was asked to join the community. This he did on the basis of a single phone call.

With the presence of the 'foreign' Brothers, the main lines of the project remained the same. As there was no end in sight to the existence of the camps, steps were taken to 'organise' operations better. For example, negotiations were undertaken with the Jesuit Refugee Services to gain some umbrella recognition of the educational work being done. The community also set up a flour mill to reduce the burden on the families in the camp. A range of social services was put into place: care of the aged and infirm, supplementary feeding for 300 malnourished 4-6 year olds, hospital transport. After a year of no real income and the wear and tear of daily living, many people were dressed in rags. Second-hand clothing was purchased and distributed.

In my chatting with each one personally, or in the community together, there was realism about the situation; there was foreboding, but there was joy, more palpable than I have ever found in any other community. They were conscious of receiving so much from those they had come to serve — these desperate, abandoned people gave them life.

We discussed possible evacuation routes to the Marist community at Nyangezi where the Brothers operated a regular secondary school for Congolese children. It took time, but the Brothers established radio connections with Bukavu, and finally a satellite telephone was installed.

On each visit, we had a more serious consideration of the well-being of the community, and the overall situation. Each one was encouraged to 'get away' every so often, to either Bukavu or Nyangezi. They went occasionally to the Jesuit Centre, Amani, in Bukavu for rest and reflection.

On the occasion of my last visit in August 1996, there was a marked increase in tension. The military training of young people in the camps had increased. Raids across the border into Rwanda had multiplied. There were now more violent militia in the camp, real stand-over people. Mobutu, the President of Zaire, had been threatening to close down all the camps, and indeed some restrictions had come into force, the school being shut down for a time. The priests living with the Brothers asked me the question, "What would make you withdraw the Brothers?", an ominous sign of a gathering storm.

Together we looked at whether the community should be based in Bukavu or in the parish of Kabare, some 10 kilometres away. They could then commute each day. The Brothers refused. The community at Nyangezi had also pleaded with them to abandon their outpost.

Why this stubbornness, this decision to put their lives at risk, since anything could happen in such an isolated situation? For them, the choice was to stay with the people, to provide as much stability as possible, to reduce the tendency to panic.

On two other occasions, this resolve was put to the test. When security conditions deteriorated rapidly in early September, the Red Cross officials ceased their service to the camp. No-one came from Bukavu. The people asked the Brothers, "Will you now abandon us too?" While such language could be construed as emotional blackmail, the Brothers heard it as a plea. They stayed. Having struggled to keep the weakest alive and in a minimum of dignity for a year, how could they walk away? There was where they had chosen to be and where they felt their vocation 'to be brothers' as they had never felt it before.

Rumours abounded. On 27th October, the news spread that Banyamulenge rebels, in league with the RPF Rwandan army of the new government in Rwanda, were close by. The people fled the camp, abandoning the little security they had. When after a day, they discovered it was not true, they straggled back miserably, only to find that others had picked over their abandoned tents. The community of Brothers was there to provide whatever support they could, particularly to mothers and children who were terrified.

Even at this stage, the Brothers made the fateful decision to remain on site at Bugobe. They really believed that this was the right thing for a Religious community to do. They had prayed about this and shared in community.

When the rebel forces took Bukavu and RPF Rwandan forces joined in, it was only a matter of time for the whole network of camps to disband. When pressed to go to the parish of Kabare, Servando said that it was already too late, that the RPF troops were in control of the road. They risked being ambushed, or badly dealt with by these troops since they would be seen as 'Hutu sympathisers'. They believed that Bugobe was the safest place to stay, given its distance from the camp.

All initial indications were that armed Hutu Interahamwe militia, including people from the camp itself, killed the Brothers. At whose orders and why? Then, in 2008 former secret service officers of the RPF were quoted as being witnesses of the execution of the Brothers by a commando of five persons to prevent them from denouncing massacres carried out by Rwandan forces. A tragedy of immense proportions for Servando, Miguel Ángel, Fernando and Julio, their family and friends, the Brothers of their Provinces, Marists throughout the world, a tragedy set against the background of much wider crimes against humanity. A tragic mystery as well that is sadly typical of many competing 'histories' from Rwanda and Congo. Perhaps one day ...

Jeff Crowe, October 31, 2018

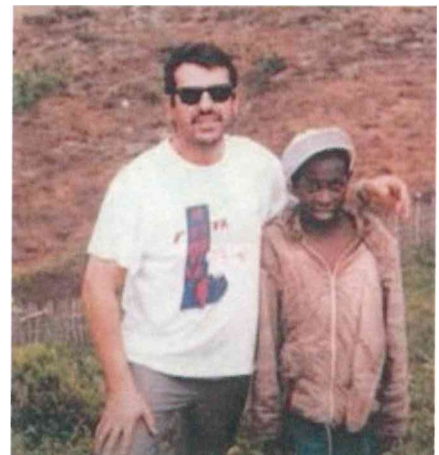


Miguel Angel

- A man among men
 - Barbu — the bearded one, half-veiled face
 - Intensity of expression, reflecting both righteousness and compassion
 - The one who tended the flowers
- .
- Thorough, competent teacher — painstaking in correcting piles of books each night
 - Suspicious of authority, be it a Zaire guard, a Red Cross official or a General Councillor! He poured his soul into his journal daily, stretching his awareness, bringing to mind the Spanish mystics
 - Care of the disabled, gentle with children
 - Profound in shared prayer

Julio Rodríguez

- Youthful energy, big frame
- Striding down the winding backtrails
- Cheerful to all
- Enthusiast for games
- Gifted with languages: Kiswahili, Lingala
- Passing the time, chatting
- The 'negotiator' with civic and military authorities, who could surprise with his ease in their language and pepper his remarks with local references
- Long-term missionary who saw this invitation as a culmination of all he had ever lived
- A breakthrough vocationally to another plane of being
- Alone on a bare knoll opposite Bugobe, quiet time with himself and with his Lord.



Fernando de la Fuente

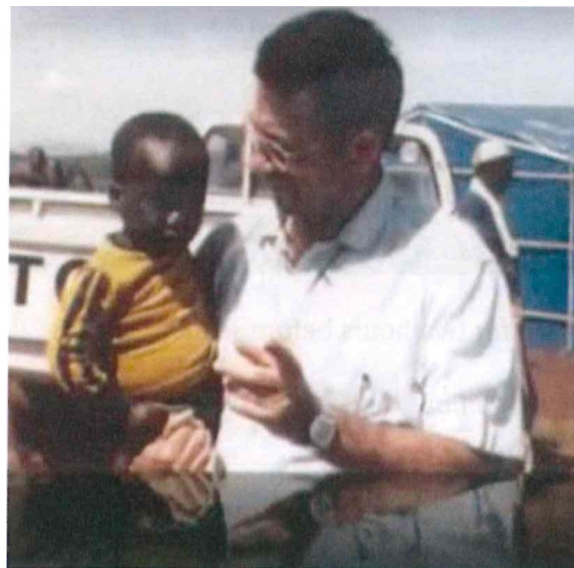
- Serenity personified
 - Quiet, ordered manner
 - Keeper of the store, hone-base man
 - Gentle even when tested by scheming kids and women in the clothing pool
-
- His mind a treasure house of insights
 - Life's experiences turned over and over in his artist's hands
 - Walking in the moonlight late at night





Servando Mayor

- Strong presence: clear eyes, handsome face
- Natural leader, intelligent, incisive, resolute
- A huge heart, burdened by not being able to address the material, emotional and spiritual poverty of the camp
- The one to confront the camp governor, UNHCR officials, the Red Cross, Jesuit Refugee Service ...
- to endure that services reached the most needy
- Creative in imagining and implementing projects that made a difference, that mobilised people to help themselves
- Challenger of youth, counsellor, spiritual guide
- Fearless in denouncing injustices — and there were many
- Deeply prayerful, Champagnat figure
- He lived with soul.



Dios os pusó en mi camino

Bathed in sunlight, in a small clearing among the towering trees, lie the graves.

One large Cross

and four smaller ones, with each one's name inscribed,

point to their brutal end:

Servando, Miguel Angel, Julio and Fernando

Their story should be told.

Busy days, confused days,

an ever-present sense of danger,

an acute sense of the fragility of the camp itself,

and of everyone therein.

The chill of early morning, waiting for the rising sun,

Common ablutions around a 200 litre drum of icy water.

Greetings, light banter, plans for the day

more than dreams for a "new day".

Gathering in prayer, "*O Lord, make haste to help us*".



Some kids have been on the road for two hours before school,

no breakfast, a meal of stodgy maize flour the evening before must do.

A contrived system of 'payment for attendance' for those from far away: no come, no pay!

An incentive to make the effort, to believe there is a future ...



A mother and a sickly child by the compound gate,
no need for words — no common language anyway.
Some anti-diarrhoea mix graciously given: boil the water!
"Merci frère", she says, wrapping her panga again,
...
'Home' is three kilometres away.
Lord have mercy on them.

Joy in Servando's eyes,

A success against bureaucracy!

Refugee cards for the unaccompanied 'street kids' of the camp,

feral- like creatures living on their wits.

A modicum of dignity for them — they exist ... officially!

But what will they barter their rations for as they have done in the past with blankets and soap!

A sea of tiny hands, reaching, clutching; *muzungu, muzungu,*

Dark eyes peer out from cavernous tents as if to say,

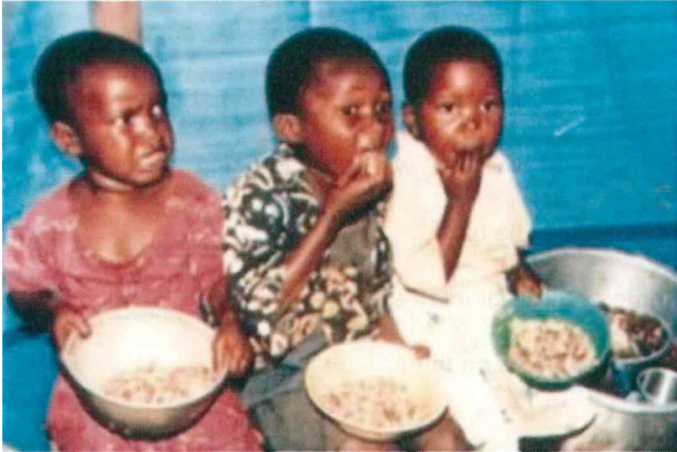
Who are you?

Your presence, your freedom, mock us. Get lost!

Miruwe, how is the back today, old mother?

The better for your asking, frère.

It takes all sorts; we are but guests.



Fifty little ones, each with a bowl.

Beans and greens for balance in the diet.

Swollen bellies a worrisome sign, no indication of excess.

Mobilise the youth to grow and to feed — a simple initiative.

A little less anxiety for the mothers.

The new generation learning some love,

Knitting colourful woollen caps and babies' booties,
Among other young women they sit,
Away from the drudgery of water-drawing and flour-grinding,
..

Final exam-day — he stands before the panel of profs, with
chalk in hand to explain some point of economics, he parries the
rapid questions thrust at him,
beads of sweat breaking on his brow.

A game? Unreal?

Who will recognise his achievement beyond this room?

He walks out, his head a little higher —

dreaming of escaping the 'prison' of the camp, to trek across Zaire to Central Africa,

Or was he among those who died in the mass executions of Tingi Tingi, and Walikale?



A vaulted dome on tied sticks, John Bosco's masterpiece,
White sheeting top, flapping in the breeze.

A thousand, maybe two, crammed in to celebrate life,
to pray for deliverance or was it vengeance?

They came to hear the Word, to dance familiar patterns,
to ask forgiveness, to partake the Bread of Life.

They came in their best, amazing in their Sunday dignity,
the young and the old, the fit and the lame — all exiled, all outcasts, contemporary lepers.
Who will wash the stain away? Come, Lord Jesus.

Never enough, but always something.

The camp divided into eight, eight people 'chosen' from each part.

These we can help, and next week another sixty-four:

The aged, the sick, the grieving, the pregnant, those cracking up ...

'Loaves and fishes' for the five thousand at Nyamirangwe ... weekly!

New clothes — balefuls of them,

Distribution carefully planned — enough for all,

At least there should have been ... we forget

the desperation and human weakness of the 'trusted ones',

those in charge, and those who came first.

Soccer for the boys, netball for the girls,

Traditional dances for all — and prizes for the winners.

The therapy of play: the fun, the focus,

just passing the time.

Better this than in the surrounding hills,
training with guns and thrusting with bayonets,
yelling words of hate.
Battling for the spirits of the young with the militants —
the cycle of violence must stop.



Thirty unpredictable kilometres to town,
to Bukavu, hardly a metropolis.

Vehicle slipping, careening down the mud-slide called a road,
The fear of broken crankshaft ever present.

A full load as usual: mothers to hospital, young Philippe to try on his new prosthetic leg,
the village headman (because he is just that, no challenge to his presence!),
and two energetic young locals, with their gumboots of authority, to guard the cargo.

Waved through military barriers on the way down, but not so on the return ...

The armed vultures in for their share, posturing, menacing ...

Who protects us from them?

At table: four Brothers and two priests, two laymen and a visitor.

We give thanks for the meal to be shared,

conscious of the meagre fare in the tents above us.

Augustin, his covering of flour washed off, recount his battle with the engine of the flour mill, a hundred
people sitting patiently in line outside.

News is shared of the latest threat by Mobutu to shut down the camps,
of the latest declarations by exiled once-were/would-be again leaders in Goma or Katusha,
of the latest brushes with Red Cross officials, the camp governor,
the Zaire army guards stationed 20 metres away, of the latest trip to town ...

What news from across the border in Rwanda, stranger?

I see new housing, shops opened, schools beginning, land being cultivated, people moving freely ...

But what of the 'disappearances' of Hutu educated men, the over-crowded prisons, the general insecurity ...?

Maybe, but life is moving ahead there. Here you are stalled.

To break the tension, Miguel tells a story of something stupid that happened that day at school.

Unfinished conversations ...

Our lives and passions have been spilled on the table —

Our second eucharist for the day.



Anguish of spirit seeps into our awareness as it must for all who look into the eyes of "Dead Men Walking".

Who has blood on his or her hands? Who doesn't?

Us included.

Hate the crime, love the perpetrator.

Yes, but when he is still armed?

Is our love and service being abused?

The Lord does not break a bruised reed, or snuff out a smouldering wick,

To the very end, *Love one another*— there is no other way.

Disarming would be a great first step!

A phonecall on the eve,

J: Go to Kabare.

S: We can't. The road is already in the hands of the FPR.

J: Go anyway.

S: Too high a risk. Besides, we have decided to be here for if and when the refugees return. See you in heaven.

J: God be with each one of you.

That fateful day began with separation —

The others left on their own journey to execution or deeper into exile . who was to know?

And then, they came, bristling with arms,

Judas figures from the camp, standing post around the house.

You knew, they knew ... the game of waiting played out till dusk.

At last they entered, the gathering darkness a back-drop to their shameful designs.

Their pretext ... to take the car, money, telephone, clothing ...

but also to provoke, to tease ...

What pushed them beyond decency, beyond the threshold of respecting life, your life as fellow-men, as brothers?

Was it a desire for revenge for some unwitting wrong-doing, some provocation of yours?

A punishment for the 'spies' they took you to be?

The price of your silence at this forced dispossession?

The fruit of twisted jealousy for your influence, for your resourcefulness, your challenge to their control?

...

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,

And art so far from saving me, from heeding my groans?

They share my garments among them.

Has your unfailing love now failed us utterly?

Have you forgotten to be gracious, o God?

When they were done, they threw our bodies in the sink-hole,

afraid that their foul deeds be quickly found and themselves avenged.

But the pit could not contain us.

Glory to you, o Lord.

We know our Redeemer liveth, and we have risen with Him.

They trashed our home ... nothing sacred to our memories left untainted.

And when they left, our village friends came near,
crouching, tripping lightly, not knowing what to find.

They too profited from the unexpected booty,
until the shocking discovery of our corpses triggered uncontrolled wailing, beaten breasts,

of loss, of responsibility.

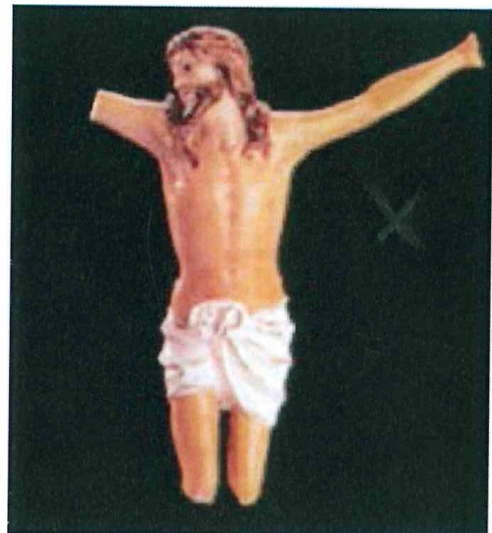
Unhinged doors bang,
the wind howls through gaps in the walls of plastic sheeting,
cockroaches scurry through open cupboards,
ripped pages lie about like leaves in autumn.

Is this our legacy? This shell, this empty shell?

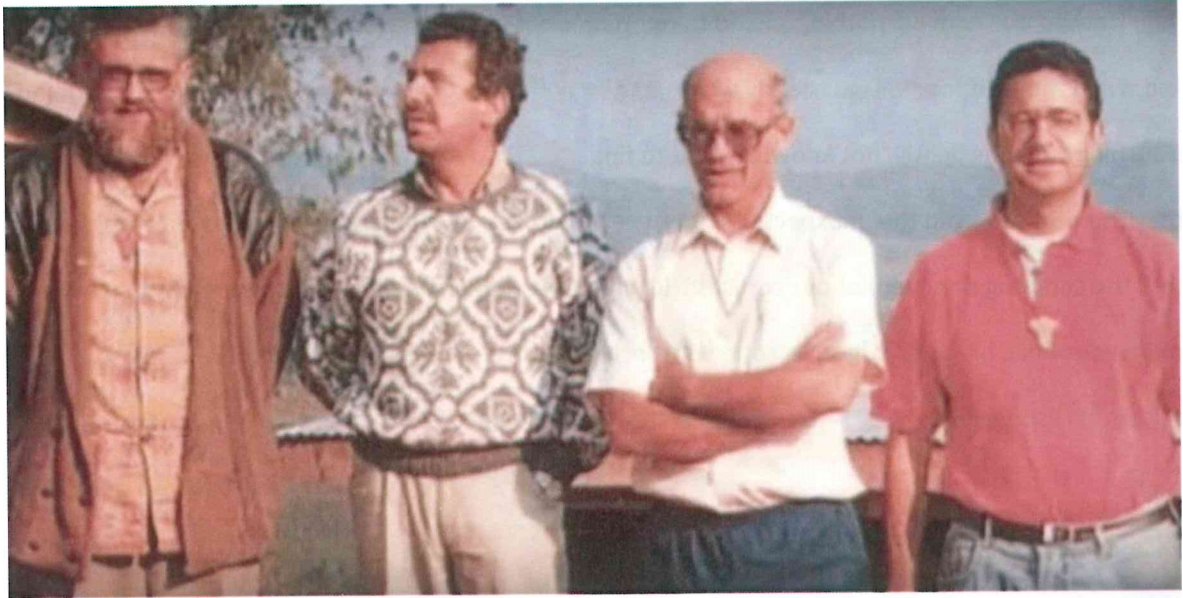
But wait!

On the chapel floor, under smashed table and torn cloth,
lies our crucifix.

No longer whole, its limbs shattered,
the eyes of the Suffering Servant still fixed beyond,



Christ in you, the hope of a glory yet to come. (Col 1: 27)



Go gently, Miguel Angel,

Go gently Julio ,

Go gently Fernando,

Go gently Servando

There is no greater love than this,

That a man should lay down his life for his friends. (Jn 15:13)

There's a calm that follows the crashing of the waves on rocks,
a stillness, a momentary disbelief at the violence just witnessed.

I see no Moses to hold back the surge,

I sent out no summons for one great act of faith of the Marist world in this long moment of darkness.

Peace be to you ...

How slow to believe ...

Go forth ... proclaim the Good News ... with hearts on fire.