

A Lasallian Developing World Project in Rwanda

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I spent six weeks of my summer in Rwanda, a tiny country in the centre of Africa - a country known by most people in the West for one thing: genocide. Genocide was the murder of nearly 1.2 million Rwandan people during the civil war of 1994, murdered because of their race. But genocide is not the thing I will remember Rwanda for.

The 12 of us from around the UK arrived in Rwanda on the 4th of July, and were the only white people in the town of Nyanza. We stayed in a dormitory at Christ The King College, and this was to be our home for the summer – a house with no running water, with tiny bunk beds and with one toilet without a flush between the 12 of us. This didn't matter as we soon adapted, and it made us feel so much better that we were accepted into the community.

The building site which we were working at was about a 20 minute walk from where we were living, and everyone whom we walked past on that walk greeted us and asked how we were. Complete strangers took the trouble to make us feel welcome; and returning to the UK where everyone walking down the street is too wrapped up in their own problems to notice you, was a shock. The building site was hard work, with some heavy lifting involved, but it was so rewarding. We managed to build the whole perimeter wall, a retaining wall, and make headway on a third teacher's house, in just 6 weeks. What also made the building site a special place was that every day, street children would come and sit with us, play with us, and generally interact. In Rwanda no-one spoke English, and only a few spoke French, so communication was hard, but we managed.

One particular story of a street child called Bizman struck me.

Bizman is 14 years old, the same age as students currently in Year 9 in our schools. I soon became aware that he came to the building site every day, and every day he wore the same clothes: torn, ill-fitting, dirty clothes. Bizman lived with his grandfather, who was too old and ill to work, hence him coming to the building site every day as he could not afford schooling. He lived with his grandfather because his whole family - brothers, sisters, parents, aunties and uncles - had all been murdered during the genocide in 1994. Yet he was a normal, happy child who loved nothing more than a kick-

around with a football, or a general bit of banter with the group. Yet he had nothing, no-one. On the last day we were there, I gave him an old Ipswich football shirt of mine, and I have never seen someone so beside himself with happiness as Bizman was. He was so grateful, and so happy to receive what all of us would regard as a very medial gift. Imagine how you would feel on receiving an old, second hand out of date piece of clothing for Christmas!

His story brings me on to the genocide itself. As I have mentioned, it happened in 1994, when I was 5 years old. Almost 1.2 million people were murdered in less than 3 months, and the West just sat back and watched. In fact, the French government supported those who carried out the atrocities. I was asked by an 18 year old boy called Elisee – who I befriended out in Rwanda - what I had learned about the genocide in the UK. And I had to answer him: Nothing. It wasn't even publicised during the event, on our news channels. How guilty did I feel? We travelled to 2 genocide memorials during our stay, the first in the capital Kigali. The memorial was a beautiful, tranquil place on the side of a mountain overlooking the capital, serving as a constant reminder of its past. 258,000 people were buried there – that's twice the size of Ipswich. What is perhaps more shocking is that there is an open grave still today, as more victims are being found. As we went round the memorial, one thing really stuck in my mind, and it was a message from the UN leader in Rwanda who was Belgian, to the UN headquarters in Brussels. He asked for 5,000 to help and they could have prevented the deaths of those 258,000 dead at the memorial and many more, from suffering such a fate. 5,000 may seem like a lot, but then think of how many are in Iraq today.

The second memorial we visited was Murambi Technical College in the south-west of the country. David Cameron, leader of the Conservatives, had visited it just a day before we did, and his quote of Murambi as "Shocking, yet necessary" summed it up well. 50,000 Rwandans hid in Murambi to take refuge from the genocide, but were betrayed by their leaders in exchange for the leaders' safety, to the Genocidaires. Only 4 survived during a mass killing, taking just three days. When the Rwanda Patriotic Force moved in and found the massacre,

they decided to preserve the bodies in the state they found them, to prevent people denying the genocide, like they do the holocaust, today. As the 12 of us moved round classroom after classroom of dead bodies, sadness, grief and guilt gripped me. All I could think of was: This could have been my family, and why did we do nothing to stop this? You could see the expressions on the victims' faces, and I felt such a pain that is indescribable. The saddest thing at Murambi was the room in which I saw all the clothes of the victims on a washing line, blood-stained, just waving around in the breeze. So peaceful, yet so distressing.

Despite all this, the people there were so happy, optimistic and colourful. Not only did they live in poverty without basic commodities that we take for granted, but they had to deal with this horrible past where they had lost family members and lived with the knowledge today that some murderers were still out there, roaming free. People lived next door to murderers, and yet there was no sense of revenge or malice. They were so welcoming to us, even though they knew that our countries did nothing to relieve their suffering. People walked around the streets of Nyanza laughing, dancing, and getting on with their lives. That is why places like Murambi are needed, as you would not know from the population, and their demeanours, that the genocide had ever occurred. We can all learn a lot from the Rwandan people. They have little, and love a lot. They are welcoming and so unselfish.

My lasting memory of Rwanda is not of sadness and grief, but of optimism. Peace and love are preached, this being evident by people walking around holding hands and hugging. The Rwandan people are now rebuilding their world, a world free of hatred and anger. Rwanda is such an amazing place, a place which I encourage you to visit, if ever you get the chance. It is a community which reminded me of the sense of community I experienced at St. Joseph's - a community that I felt so much a part of and a country in which I felt so safe. Rwanda is a country which acknowledges its past and exercises a willingness to learn from it. Rwanda is a real life experience of the victory of Love over Monster.

As you can tell from my account, I had an amazing time in Rwanda and I encourage everyone who can, to participate in a Lasallian Developing World Project when you get the opportunity.

I would like to finish with a prayer: Let us pray: Lord, help us all to show love to one another, like the people of Rwanda showed me. Help us to gain the strength to intervene in atrocities, like the genocide, that occur today in places like Darfur. Help those of us who want to go on a project to gain the strength and courage to participate. Amen.

