

Who Are My People? Violence and the Invention of Love in Sub-Saharan Africa.¹

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Research Concept

The 1994 Genocide in Rwanda raises many social, political, and missiological questions, some of which have been the subject of investigation in my earlier work.² My Luce research project, *Who are My People* grows out of a question that was first put to me in the early days of the Genocide in the Spring of 1994. I was a PhD candidate at Leuven, Belgium, and we had just finished watching the BBC evening news in the common room at the Helieg Geest College. The news had carried stories of the killing going on in Rwanda with images of dead bodies in the streets, churches and on rivers. As we left the common room in stunned silence, a colleague from India turned to me and asked, “Why do your people always kill one another?” I was not sure whether ‘your people’ in Kurian’s questions referred to Rwandans, Hutus or Africans. He might have sensed my hesitation and so he clarified, “I mean, why you Africans always kill your own people?”

Who are My People is an attempt to respond (not answer) to Kurian’s question. Embedded in Kurian’s question are two issues, first the issue of identity. What does it mean to be African? What is it that I share with other Africans that makes them “my people” more than any history, friendship or relationship with a European or an American could ever make them “my people”? Was it the color of my skin, biology, history, geography or culture that makes me naturally, and

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² See e.g. *Mirror to the Church: Resurrecting Faith After Genocide in Rwanda* (Zondervan, 2009). See also, “Christianity, Tribalism and The Rwanda Genocide,” in *A Future for Africa: Critical Essays in Christian Social Imagination*. Wipf & Stock, 2005.

thus without effort allied to other “Africans” more than to a Belgian or a Norwegian? What does it mean to belong to a group of people called “Africans”? On one level, these are philosophical questions, the kind of questions that only a scholar would raise. On another level, these were existential and personal questions for the fact of being “African” had a facticity to it. When people saw me on the streets or classroom at Leuven, they saw me, treated me, and related to me as an African. Moreover connected to my being “African” is the usual association of “Africa” with “tribes.” When I would introduce myself as coming from Uganda, people would generally ask me, ‘what is your tribe’? This is where issues became personal. For my parents had migrated from Rwanda in the late 1940’s and had settled in Uganda where I was born. Whenever I told this story, some of my friends would say that means you are *really* Rwandan. All they wanted to know was whether I was Hutu or Tutsi. But since one of my parents was Hutu and the other Tutsi, I was always left wondering, was I Hutu or Tutsi or Muganda? What is my tribe? I did not speak Kinyarwanda, and had been to Rwanda only once, when I was a child. What was it then that made me *really* Rwandan, and Ugandan only superficially, I wondered. Who are My People?

The second issue embedded in Kurian’s question is the reality of prevalent violence on the African continent, violence that takes many forms, and for which the Rwanda Genocide seemed to be, if extreme, not totally unexpected, in Africa. In *Who are My People*, I wanted to explore the complex relationship between what it means to be African and various forms of violence on the continent.

The driving assumption behind my investigation was that there seems to be something distinctly modern about the violence in Africa, which seems to be connected to a crisis of belonging in post-colonial Africa. I wanted to trace the crisis through three key markers of identity in Africa: ethnicity, religion, and land, as a way to highlight its unique modernity and display its

violent manifestation. My hunch was that ethnic violence, religious violence and ecological violence in Africa do not represent three separate forms of violence, but modalities of the same crisis, which manifests itself through an endless reproduction of violence, which takes ethnic, religious and ecological forms. My interest in the project was primarily constructive and essentially theological. I wanted to trace the Christian difference within Africa's crisis of belonging. More specifically, I was curious as to if and how Christianity in Africa could generate and nurture alternative forms of community, non-violent agency and ecological possibilities in the face of ethnic, religious and ecological violence in Africa. How do these possibilities look like?

Research methodology

The research has involved a combination of research methodologies, library research, and structured conversations and interviews in select locations. The library research brought me in dialogue with two sets of scholars. On the one hand, post-colonial African scholars who have engaged the question of "Africa" and "African Identity", and on the other, African theologians and their views on African Christian identity. *Who are My People* also engaged structured conversations with select leaders and interviews in different locations. The research took me to Rwanda to meet with Maggy Barankitse at his new home in exile, "the oasis of peace", and to Ruhango, a Catholic parish that did not experience genocidal massacres in 1994. The research also took me to the Central African Republic to study the "religious violence" of 2012-3, and to meet (and interview) various leaders there, including Fr. Bernard Kinvi at Bossemptele. The research also took me to Kenya to study various ecological initiatives there, including Catholic Youth Network for Environment Sustainability in Africa (CYNESA) and Wanghari Maathai's Green Belt Movement. It also took me to Benin to interview Fr. Bernard Kinvi and study his Songhai Center. As part of the research I was I also carried out extensive interviews in the slums of Kampala and

other towns in Uganda to understand the shifting relationship (of mostly young people) with land and its economic and environmental implications.

The decision to engage a social science methodology of qualitative research (ethnography) was motivated by a number of reasons. First, it was to advance *Who are My People* as an interdisciplinary inquiry. In this connection, I have been fortunate to have a group of scholars, from different disciplines and different universities working with me on an investigation of how religious and secular forces collaborate, compete, contend and at times implicate each other in shaping modes of authority, community and identity in Africa. *Who Are My People* is part of this *Contending Modernities* Project (based at University of Notre Dame), and has benefitted from the encouragement and feedback of my colleagues on this project. Secondly, it was to refine and advance a methodology I have been developing - theological portraiture, as a distinct method of inquiry and “story-telling.” Thus in the various interviews and conversation with select activists, my intention was not simply to listen **to** their stories (which I needed to capture), but in doing so, I was also listening **for** a story, namely the extent to which their lives and agency was grounded in, and reflected, another account of belonging. The hope was that out of the interviews and conversations I would be able to build rich portraits that “testify” to the possibility of non-violent ways of living into Africa’s modernity.

Major findings

The research has yielded fresh insights and confirmed some key assumptions. Among them:

1. *African identity and the crisis of Africa’s modernity.*

In trying to sort through the mumbled mess of ideas of what it means to be African three scholars whose work I found particularly helpful are Valery Mudimbe, Ali Mazrui, and Anthony

Appiah. The combined insights from these postcolonial scholars were to confirm a crisis - “the crisis of African emergence into modernity” (Soyinka), which gives rise not only to a unique African Identity, but also to a continent marked by major paradoxes and contradictions. Their insights, were in other words, to lead to a deep appreciation of the processes and assumptions out of which we come to view and think about Africa in modern times. African identity, therefore, is not a reflection of a metaphysical essence or some biological, geographical or cultural oneness! Rather it is the result of the way that Africa and Africans have been imagined and continue to be imagined through contact with other civilizations, most uniquely European modernity. It is in this connection that Mudimbe talks about the “invention” of Africa by Europeans who needed to present Africa in a particular way so as to bolster the European colonial adventure. Thus, “Africa” emerges in the post-Enlightenment European imagination and discourse as Europe’s “other” - disabled, deficient and lacking – lacking religion, history, civilization, development, democracy, human rights, and ethics. Mazrui describes the invention of Africa as a prophecy in the process of self-fulfillment. The imagination of a dark, primitive and underdeveloped Africa succeeds in inventing the very continent that is imagined. In this connection, Mazrui notes, the contact with modern Europe bequeathed to Africa not only the map of a continent called “Africa” but a shared sense of “African identity.” The humiliation and degradation of Black Africans across the centuries contributed to their mutual recognition of each other as “fellow Africans.” The contact with modern Europe was also to result in a series of paradoxes and contradictions that constitute “the African condition.” The cycles of violence in Africa must be located within this context of a continent, still reeling from the crises of her unique modernity.

2. The need to “testify” to another way of living into Africa’s modernity

Appiah's contribution to the above debate is in rejecting as "myth" the idea of racial or tribal unity as the basis of African identity, an idea he finds both misleading and disabling. Given the "circulation of cultures" Appiah notes, there can be no such thing as a pure Igbo, Hutu, Tutsi identities, no fully *autochthonous echt*-African culture or identity. "We are already contaminated by each other." Since identities are not static, but dynamic African identity is not an exclusive identity; it is for its bearers one among many. Much of what Appiah notes about African identity is true of tribal or ethnic identity. Significantly also, even though Appiah rejects the illusion of a 'metaphysical or mythic unity or a singular African world view, he acknowledges that being African already has "a certain context and meaning. We share a continent and its ecological problems, we share a relation of dependency to the world economy, we share the problem of racism in the way the industrialized world thinks of us"Accordingly, the appeal to African identity can still be 'useful' to the extent that it is able to mobilize continental and global alliances in the emancipatory struggles of African peoples. However, this is a matter that has to be decided case by case. This is what calls for the need to "testify" to good and bad ways of appealing to 'African identity', useful and not so useful notions of African identity, peaceful and not so peaceful ways of living in the reality of Africa. Stories play a crucial role in this "testifying."

3. African Christian identity as a journey.

My engagement with African theologians and their views on African Christian identity led to one conclusion. If, as Appiah had noted, there can be useful and not so useful appeals to "African identity", the way the dominant theological tradition in African has tended to frame and invoke the notion of 'African Christian identity' had rendered the notion both politically toothless and theologically uninteresting. For even though the issue of Christian identity has received extensive attention within African theological scholarship, the political nature of Christian identity had not

been sufficiently acknowledged. More specifically, the subversive role that Christian identity can play in destabilizing so-called “natural,” “cultural,” “ethnic” or “national” identities has not been sufficiently recognized or highlighted. The result has been to turn “Christian identity” into an “irreal sublime” that wafts above everyday material and political realities, which in turn deprives Christians of any resources to question the violent politics of ethnic identity in Africa. What is needed, but discovered was mostly lacking, is the notion of Christian identity as an invitation into a journey with a definite direction and a distinct telos. The goal of this journey is the creation of something new, which can variously be described as a Mestizo, in-between existence (Elizondo), a new clan (Mulago); an Abrahamic revolution (Volf), a community of resident aliens (Hauerwas) and an “Ephesian moment” (Walls) of a “new we”.

4. Re-inventing Africa's modernity: alternative accounts of politics and economics

If tracing the recurrent patterns of violence to the “invention” of modern Africa was important for my project, my primary interest in the research was see if and how Africa’s unique modernity could be “re-invented.” I have been particularly interested in the difference that Christianity can make within this reinvention. This is the constructive direction of *Who Are My People*, which led me to attend to select exemplars who are able to resist ethnic, religious and ecological violence, and are thus able to improvise new communities in the face of those forms of violence. This has perhaps been the most personally satisfying and edifying part of the research to sit at the feet of Christian leaders like Maggy, Kinvi, and Nzamujo and try to understand their agency, the visions that motivate and propel it forward, and its impact on their communities. Reading their lives and agency in the context of the violence around them confirmed their work as an attempt at “reinvention” not only of the history of their communities, but of the sense of belonging, and the very meaning of “my people.” This is what makes their work essentially political, as it represents

another way of living within Africa's modernity. One definite product from the research is the rich portraits of Christian activists who "testify" to a different vision of politics and economics in Africa. As with any portraiture, my hope that these portraits can both inform and inspire.

5. *The invention of love: "Love has made me an inventor"*

One characteristic that the leaders studied share is their "craziness". Thomas Sankara had once noted one cannot carry out fundamental change without a "certain degree of madness" – the madness of non-conformity, of "turning one's back on old formulas." I detected this "rebelliousness" in all the activists I studied. And yet, going hand in hand with the "stubbornness" there was a marked and remarkable "gentleness" about them. I discovered that what made the strange combination of rebelliousness and gentleness possible for each of them was the intimate connection they all felt with the story of God's self-sacrificing love that is poured out for all especially the poor, sick, and vulnerable. They located their lives within this story, which they embraced as both "gift" and "mission." As gift, they discovered their own and others "true" identity "within it. Maggy: "love is the most beautiful calling We are created out of love and to love." As mission, they each felt called to "re-present" (make present) this gift to all in the world, most especially the poor, sick and vulnerable. Their own willingness to embrace suffering in the process of extending God's love to the most vulnerable is a confirmation of the extent to which the story of God's self-sacrificing love has taken hold of their loves. This is what makes the activists "exemplars" of Christian identity in Africa. For, Christian identity is not a static essence, spiritual or otherwise, but an invitation into the gift and mission of God's self-sacrificing love in the world. What the activists studied confirm is that God's self-sacrificing love does indeed create something new in the world – a "new we". In the end, it is this "new we" that is both the argument

and evidence that another Africa is possible, and that the waters of baptism run deeper than the blood of tribalism.

The Book

I am working on capturing the findings of the research into a book with five chapters spread over two sections. In the First Section, I engage philosophical and theological questions on African identity. In **Chapter One**, I engage post colonial theorists on the issues of African identity and what it means to be African. In **Chapter Two**, I examine how the issue of African identity has been handled within African theology to make the point that the latter has on the whole offered few resources in re-thinking African identity from a specifically theological vantage point. The Second Section (Love's Invention in the midst of Africa's violent modernity) has three chapters. **Chapter Three**, against the backdrop of the 1994 Rwanda Genocide, I display the unique modernity of "ethnic violence" in Africa and narrate Maggy Barankitse's maison and the Ruhango community as a theological alternative. In **Chapter Four**, against the backdrop of the "religious violence" in Central African Republic, I highlight the crisis of citizenship within Africa's politics, and narrate Fr. Bernard Kinvi's work at Bossemptele as a counter politics shaped through the story of God's self-sacrificing love. In **Chapter Five**, I explore "ecological violence" and trace it to the same crisis of African modernity. Fr. Godfrey Nzamujo's, O.P. and his Songhai Center is described as a response focused on the practice of creation care and economic well being made possible by "entering into the mystery" of Christ's death and resurrection.

Finally, a note about audience, style and expected impact. I am writing the book in a scholarly but non-academic language to make it widely accessible. I am also experimenting with a new style. I try to capture the interviews and conversations with the interviewees in a transactional (journalistic) style, which will, I hope, make the book more engaging. The study will advance the

scholarly conversation on World Christianity by providing in-depth scholarly analysis of the theological exploration, innovation and experimentation emerging from the African church. In this way, I also hope that *Who are My People* will hopefully, in its methodology, analysis and conclusions model the kind of theological inquiry needed in the era of World Christianity.

Some excerpts from Chapter Four might be helpful to capture the style and argument of the book.

Chapter Four
‘Religious Violence’ and the Reinvention of Politics in Central African Republic:
Fr. Bernard Kinvi’s Politics of Compassion at Bossempfle

(a) Introduction: Making Sense of CAR

In March 2013, Seleka rebels, made up of loosely organized militia groups that drew primarily from the North East, ousted president François and installed their own leader Michel Djotodia. Even though the Seleka would soon be officially disbanded, its members continued to commit crimes such as pillaging, looting, rape and murder. During the nine months of ad hoc Seleka rule and widespread criminality, a violent response began to build, drawing initially on local self defense groups. The fighters became known as “anti-balaka”. Soon the conflict took on the mantle of a religious war, as anti-balaka militias, many of whom Christian, began attacking Muslims out of revenge for the Seleka’s acts. By the time of the Bangui Forum (organized by the interim president, Catherine Samba- Panza, bringing together Central Africans from all regions and backgrounds to find a solution to the crisis, more than 10,000 people had been killed, some 390,000 Muslims had fled the CAR and nearly 1 million of the country’s 4.5 million residents had been displaced.

How does one explain the civil war in the Central African Republic, where Muslims constitute 15% , Christians 80% and traditionalists 5%? How does one account for the ‘religious’ violence given the fact that there had been no history of religious animosity in CAR, and the fact that Christians, Muslims and traditionalists had until now lived peacefully with and amongst one another?

Part of the answer, and a great part of it, lies within the unique history of the Central African Republic, more specifically in the way the state, power, and the country itself have been imagined within that history. Attending to the history of Central Africa reveals a consistent pattern, namely the fact that Central Africa has been successively “owned” and controlled by powerful outside and local interests, who have successively abused, used or simply neglected the majority of the population. The area that would eventually become the Central African republic had been settled from at least the 7th century on by overlapping empires, including the Kanem-Bornu, Ouddai, Banguirmi, and Dafour groups based in the Lake Chad region and along the Upper Nile. Slave trading Sultans who controlled the area in the early part of the 19th century depleted the area demographically leaving it “an archipelago of scattered ethnic

groups...isolated from one another by unclaimed buffer zones.” (Lombard & Cayannais, 18). The French annexed the area (Oubangui –Chari) in 1890s making it part of French Equatorial Africa territory (includes present day Chad, Cameroon, the Republic of Congo and Gabon). French colonization was alternately brutal and neglectful (Lombard & Cayannais, 3). France had very little interest in the territory. Its conquest was intended to pre-empt further Belgian, German and British colonial ambitions. Finding the area inaccessible, and therefore difficult to administer, France leased the territory to forty private companies, giving them virtually unlimited power to exploit the ‘vacant and unowned land.’ Employing a method of exploitation copied from King Leopold’s Congo Free State, the concessionary companies levied a head tax on the local population and conscripted them as forced labor in the gathering of wild rubber or on newly established cotton plantations. Bodel Bokassa, the army commander who seized power (1965) shortly after the country’s Independence perpetuated the politics of control and extraction and the ‘ownership’ of the state as personal property. A captain of the French army, Bokassa’s model was France's self-made emperor Napoleon. In 1977, in a direct imitation of Napoleon's self-coronation in 1804, Bokassa spent \$200 million on a lavish coronation ceremony for himself as the Emperor Bokassa I of the newly renamed Central African Empire.

The imagination of the state as a property – as ‘cake’ to be shared out greatly explains the constant logic of “fighting” and the many (a total of 6) military coups d’état as various political and military elites struggle to control the state and thus ensure in the memorable words of Michele Wrong that “it is out turn to eat.”

.....(brief historical overview.....)

(b) Making the Religious War in CAR thinkable

However, to understand how religion became a flashpoint in the fighting of 2012-3, one needs to locate the 2012-3 events not only within the social history of Central African Republic (above), but also within the micro dynamics of Central African society – within the way that Central African society works – given this particular history of state formation and its politics.

In order to get a sense of some of micro dynamics of Central African society, I made my first trip to CAR at the end of February 2018. I wanted to experience the effects of the 2013

violence, and to find out way how the Central Africans themselves experienced and thought about the war. I was also interested to hear the people's views on the future of their country, and to research into grassroot initiatives that represented hope for the future. I talked to various sections of the population: youth, women, chiefs, politicians and religious leaders, in and around Bangui, the capital, but also in Bossemptele, 230 miles northwest of Bangui. My research illumined at least four paradoxes of Central African society, from within which matrix the 'religious' violence of 2013 becomes thinkable.

1. A Phantom state.

Upon my arrival at Bangui M'Poko International Airport I was met by Jules, a young Jesuit priest, my guide and translator for the two weeks I was in CAR. Originally from Cameroon Jules has been stationed here, living with the Jesuit community and working mostly with the youth in campus ministry at the University of Bangui. I was grateful that he was there to meet me, for I would not have known where to begin to navigate the linguistic, cultural and bureaucratic systems. There seemed to be chaos everywhere inside the small terminal as everyone crowded around the tiny immigration window trying to get their documents stamped. Jules took my passport and disappeared behind one of the cubicles. When he returned after ten minutes he told me that he had to talk to somebody because my visa had yet not come through. We had been cleared to go, but would have to return on Monday for the visa to be fixed in my passport. The road to the airport is lined with makeshift markets with lots of young people vending fruits, French baguette, handbags and an assortment of used clothes. Jules drove to the center of town to show me the monument to Bathlomey Boganda, the ex-priest who negotiated CAR's Independence from France; he also showed me the presidential office, prime minister's residence, the university and the Cathedral (Immaculate conception), where in 2015, pope Francis had opened the Jubilee Year of Mercy. We drove by Bangui River as Jules pointed out the DRC on the other side of the river. We stopped at the very first Catholic parish (established 1894 by Spiritan missionaries). Even the church is run down and in disrepair. The country, he explained has nine Catholic dioceses all of them, except one, run by missionary congregations.

Why is that I ask?

“The local clergy have an image problem. No one trusts local clergy, but he adds, “but no one trusts anything Central African anyway.”

Notre Dame Guest house (where I will be staying for the next two weeks), is a moderate and clean guest house connected to the pastoral center. It is run by religious sisters from Benin. Before we check in Jules wanted to show me the Ledger, the biggest hotel in town. The compound and expansive lobby is full of UN and other foreign personnel.

“This is where everything happens,” Jules tells me. “This is where the real power lies.”

But, I ask Jules, I thought one of the problems of CAR is the endless struggle for power by local politicians and military elites.

“Yes, that is true, but these leaders, Dacko, Kolingmba, Patasse, Bozize they are all puppets of France and other foreign interests. Everything in this country is controlled by foreigners: the politics by France, the economics by the Lebanese, and the Church by foreign missionary congregations.”

What is then left for the Central Africans, the local people, I ask.

“There are really three options for people to survive: Join politics, go abroad, or join the militia.”

On the plane, I had read *Making Sense of the Central African Republic*, a collection of essays edited by Tatiana Carayanis and Louisa Lombard. In one of the essays, the author Steven Smith, had noted that statehood in CAR cannot be described in terms of either “success” or “failure” but as a trajectory that has resulted in a “phantom state” which for most Central Africans is experienced as a “painful absence *and* a hurtful presence.” (17). Smith had also noted that one thing that unites every Central Africans is that they are always trying to find a way around state control. I found the irony in both Smith and now Jules observation striking: one obvious way to survive CAR phantom politics is to join politics. As Smith had noted, “to launch a rebellion in CAR is to claim a place at the negotiating table.” (135).

How many militias, I asked Jules, are still active in CAR?

“The UN is leading a heavy disarmament and demobilization program,” he tells me, “but it is very difficult to know how many militias. You see the government has very little control outside Bangui.”

Later in the week, I had a chance to talk to Jean Pierre Betinzi, working in the President’s office in charge of disarmament. He expressed total frustration. “The program,” he noted, “is poorly funded, and time bound, but every time we turn around there are new militias to register. At times it is difficult to know who is a militia and who is not.”

The ultimate irony seems to be that most of the militias trying to get a place at the negotiating table of CAR’s phantom politics are themselves phantom militias!

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d. Fr. Bernard Kinvi and The invention of love in Bossemptele.

Bossemptele lies 230 miles northwest of Bangui. The catholic parish runs a rudimentary hospital, the only one in a 150 mile radius. In 2010, a young Camillian priest, a native of Togo was sent to Bossemptele to be in charge of both the mission and the hospital. Fr. Bernard Kinvi was 32. When the violence from the Seleka take over reached Bossemptele in 2013, the mission and hospital became a place of refuge. At first it was Christians fleeing from the Seleka who found refuge in the mission, and when anti-balaka militias formed, it was the Muslims who sought shelter at the parish. At the height of the anti-balaka purge, over a thousand Muslim refugees, mostly women and children lived at the mission hospital. During this time, Father Kinvi not only fed the refugees and treated the wounded (both Seleka and anti-balaka), he buried the dead (many decomposing bodies lay in the streets and threatened a cholera outbreak). The anti-balaka would sometimes call him after they killed someone saying, “we have our work, you have yours. We kill, you bury.” Sometimes they would demand ransom from him in exchange for someone’s life. On more than one occasion, he was threatened by both the Seleka and anti-balaka for being on the side of the ‘enemy’.

For his extraordinary courage during the crisis, Kinvi has received a number of awards (Human Rights Watch 2014, Time Magazine (2014 list of 100 most influential people); 2016 Aurora Award (finalist) and hailed as a great “humanitarian hero.” But “humanitarian” does not capture

the full range of motivations behind Kinvi's work at Bossemptele and the imagination that drives it, and out of which the concern for the refugees and sick that was manifested during the crisis, flows. The more closely one examines the reasons behind his work at Bossemptele, the more one appreciates its political nature, more specifically the revolutionary vision of identity (who are we), and the expansive sense of "my" people made possible by God's love, which is poured out for all especially the sick, poor, and suffering. This self sacrificing love of God, which Kinvi encountered through the Camillian order is what he now seeks to recreate at Bossemptele – during the war, and after.

As a non-Central African national, Kinvi had an option to leave. I asked him why he stayed in Bossemptele even when his life was threatened. Because, he noted as a Camillian, "I took a vow to remain with the sick and to serve them even at the danger of my life." I had never heard of the Camillians, and was curious to find out about them.

A Roman Catholic religious order, dedicated to the care of the sick, the Camillians operate in 35 countries, where they run hospitals, and provide trained physical as well as spiritual care for the sick. They were founded in 1582 by St. Camillus de Lellis (1550-1614). Camillus had dedicated most of his youth to a life of soldering, gambling and drunkenness. Staying at a hospital in Rome suffering from an incurable leg sore, Camillus noticed the poor care given to the sick and dying. It is then that he realized that God was calling him to care for the sick. He invited some other young men to join him to care for the sick as concrete expression of their faith. Before and throughout the 1800s, frequent epidemics, including the Black Plague, decimated the "Servants of the Sick", but the Order continued to grow throughout Europe and worldwide inspired by Camillus own example and often quoted words of St. Camillus that the poor and sick are the way to God's heart. In serving them, we serve Jesus, the Christ. At their profession, members of the order take not only the three traditional religious vows of poverty, chastity and obedience but a fourth vow to care for the sick even with danger to one's own life.

This is the order that Kinvi joined when he was 19.

I was curious how he'd found his way to the Camillians, and how compassion for the sick and dying had found its way to his heart?

He'd grown up in a polygamous family. When he was six, he lost his young sister (electrocuted), and soon after his step sister (killed by his boyfriend). During the years of

political unrest in Togo, he and his family spent 6 months as refugees. When he was 10 his dad got a stroke and was paralyzed, and the young Kinvi was often at his side taking care of him.

“I knew the pain of losing my sisters, of being a refugee, and of having a sick father.” These experiences, he explained, “helped me, I think to become more empathetic... I could feel the pain of others.” He had also read a small book about Louis Scrosoppi, a priest who had dedicated his whole life to serving the sick and orphans and had founded a female congregation (*Sœurs de la Providence de saint Gaétan de Thiene*). “I went to them and asked if they had a male community that looked after the sick. They are the ones who directed me to the Camillians, who had a formation house in Benin.”

During his formation with the Camillians, Kinvi remembers at least four things that touched him the most. First, it was the life of Camillus himself and his dedication to the sick and dying. Story is told that during the plague in Europe, while everyone was running away from the plague, Camillus and his band were running into the plague infested villages to take care of the sick and dying. This and other stories of self-sacrificing love, would come to shape Kinvi’s spirituality and courage. He remembers in a particular way, the stories of Maggy Barankitse (of maison shalom in Burundi), and of the Seminarians of Buta (Burundi) who stood together, Hutu and Tutsi, and were willing to face death. “Every time, I felt giving up during the crisis, I remembered these stories, and they encouraged me.”

Secondly, his internship at a hospice. “At first it was very difficult for me to stay with the sick and dying, to bathe, feed and smell them, but gradually I got used to it, and even became happy. For I knew that in touching the sick, I was touching Jesus.”

Thirdly, it was the course on Catholic social teaching, especially the principle of the preferential option for the poor. “Every time I go near the poor, I remember the church’s calling to minister to the poor.”

Fourthly, the course on eschatology, which stressed the vision of Christian hope in the world, also helped Kinvi to see that our hope is not limited to the here and now but “there is life beyond this world.”

These four elements in Kinvi’s formation continue to shape his life as a Camillian priest. They also allow one to appreciate how his ministry at Bossemptele is not merely “pastoral” but a

revolutionary form of politics, which offers counter narrative to CAR's politics of violence and dispossession. At least five elements highlight the sense in which in his pastoral ministry Kinvi is reinventing CAR's politics from the ground up. Focusing on these five elements helps to bring Kinvi's political imagination into sharper focus.

Kinvi's Counter Politics of Com-~~passion~~

First, its location at Bossemptele. Kinvi's incarnational ministry here at the mission and hospital has endeared him to the local population who (Christians, Muslims, traditionalists) all refer to him as "our priest." Kinvi's commitment to this local place and its people must be seen against CAR's politics of abandonment and the generalized sentiment that CAR does not matter. Rooted in CAR's colonial history this sentiment has translated into despair about CAR and the abandonment and neglect especially of the rural communities. If Gumba had rightly noted that one of the greatest challenges of politics in CAR was the state's "abandonment" of the people, and called on the government to be "close to the people," Kinvi provides a most compelling example of what being "close to the people" means and concretely looks like. In New York after Kinvi was honored with the Alison Des Forges HRW award, he was asked what he planned to do with the award and whether he was going to use the "international" platform to try to bring change to CAR. Kinvi's response seemed to indicate that he was already bringing change to CAR and that Bossemptele was his international platform. "I told them, I very much want to return to "my" community, and continue to serve the sick and poor in Bossemptele... This is what I am currently doing. I go in the neighborhood and visit the sick people, the elderly and the handicapped."

Secondly, a new sense of belonging. As we have noted, autochthony (belonging to the soil) has been an underlying feature in CAR's politics, with Muslims constantly suspected as 'foreigners' and not true sons of the soil. Even though (perhaps because of) Kinvi himself is not a "son of the soil" he is helping to redefine the sense of belonging. "I do not feel I am a foreigner here," he told me. "Actually I am more comfortable here than when I am in Togo." Even though he has been here only eight years, he speaks the local language Sango "better than I speak my mother tongue." Kinvi's feeling of belonging to this local place even more than his native Togo is not based on blood or soil, but on his sense of identity as a child of God who "belongs" to God.

This, according to Kinvi, is our one true identity. All other forms of belonging are secondary. What his Camillian formation helped him to see is that to serve the sick and poor is one way to get to God's heart. But to get to God's heart is to discover, the same lesson he had learnt from his father's generosity and hospitality, that "there is always room" – and that everyone has a place in God's heart. Kinvi's hospitality and care for the vulnerable (which became particularly evident during the crisis) regardless of their religion, origin or nationality is just a reflection of this expansive sense of belonging within God's love.

Thirdly, an odd community. Kinvi's hospitality was to transform the Catholic mission at Bossemptele into an odd community, which offered a rare Ephesian moment that revealed the reality and possibility of New Central African society. Even after Kinvi had helped evacuate many Muslims to Chad and Cameroon, a few remained at the parish: a traumatized teen-age boy, two Peul girls with polio, and an elderly blind woman who had been left in a river after being attacked with machetes. The town's Imam, married to a Christian woman, was also living (until last year when he passed) at the parish, contributing what he could to Father Bernard's work. An experienced tailor, he earned his keep at the mission by sewing school uniforms.³

Fourthly, a politics of serving the poor. One consistent driving force behind CAR's politics has been the struggle for power, and with it, the control of CAR's resources. This self-serving 'politics of the belly' has succeeded in turning the CAR into an ongoing battle field and impoverished the majority of the population. Given this politics, which has become the 'norm,' Kinvi's commitment to serving the poor and sick offers a refreshing alternative. Moreover, compared to the Bangui-based politics shaped around abstract concepts like "power", "resources" state bureaucracy, statistics, the concrete materiality of Kinvi's local engagement: feeding, treating, bathing – in a word, "touching" the poor offers a reminder of the true goal of politics. For in the end, the measure of any true polity is how well it treats its weakest members: the poor, the stranger, the homeless, the sick. This is what makes his work at once Eucharistic (in touching the poor, I touch Jesus), but also prophetic, in that it is both a renunciation (critique) of politics as a struggle for power, and a proclamation of the good news: this is what true politics is about. It is in this sense that one can refer to Kinvi's efforts at Bossemptele as a revolutionary re-invention of politics. I think it is something like this that

³ Jon Lee Anderson, The Mission: A Last defense against Genocide, New Yorker October 20, 2014: <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/10/20/mission-3>

Medard was hinting at when he said, “people are looking for something more” – something more, that is, than politics as usual.

Lastly, healing the spiritual crisis. Even though the 2012-3 crisis was not a ‘religious’ war, what our investigation has confirmed is that a deep spiritual wound – the ongoing spiritual insecurity, fueled much of the violence. Through his work at the mission hospital, Kinvi is helping to heal the spiritual wound. What his story helps to illumine is that healing the ‘spiritual’ wound at the heart of CAR’s politics, takes concrete ‘material’ processes and commitments: touching, feeding, bathing, treating... the bodies of especially the most vulnerable and helpless members of the body politic. But that in itself is almost unimaginable, unless one is driven, just as Kinvi is, not by a quest for power, but by love – the self-sacrificing love like one encounters in the heart of God. This excess of love is the only credible and hopeful antidote to the politics of violence. Not the generals, not the international agencies and power brokers, not the self seeking politicians, but the likes of Kinvi are the hope for CAR.