



A Lesson Dedicated to the Genocide in Burundi: An Occasion of Dialogue as a Space of Relationship Among Cultures

Guest post by Maria Flora Mangano

I am happy to share with you what happened recently in my class, during a lesson dedicated to the genocide of Rwanda and Burundi. I am currently lecturing on dialogue among cultures at St. Peter's Philosophical-Theological Institute in Viterbo, Italy.

One of the students comes from Burundi; his name is Jean. He introduced himself during the first lesson, describing his background and choice of life as a religious. One day outside of class, he mentioned the war in Burundi and the genocide of 1993. In that moment he shared with me and two Italian students what it was like to be a Tutsi. In 2 or 3 minutes he described a few images of the genocide, which he lived through when he was 12 years old; thanks to God, all his family survived. I was shocked by his words and I asked him if he would be able to share his experience with the class, proposing that the students would both listen to his story and see part of the film *Hotel Rwanda* together. We could organise this special and unforgettable lesson in a couple of hours.

Jean prepared a powerpoint and presented the story of his country and the story of his family and relatives during those three terrible days of the genocide. I proposed to the class not to see the entire movie (which is quite long, so we saw only the trailer) but rather to dedicate the majority of the time to Jean's personal story. I introduced the technical vocabulary, including genocide and shoah, sharing what these terms have meant in the last century and what they mean now. The 16 students come from 9 countries; some of them did not know even where Burundi was. I asked the students to try to create a space of relationship in which they could speak without any fear of offending or to be offended.

Jean was extremely clear in explaining the historical background, presenting the political and social aspects underlying the genocide. Then he shared his story with us. I am still speechless, shocked and impressed. It was the first time that one of my students desired to share what the genocide was for him and he prepared everything in detail. One young person who survived the genocide decided to offer his experience as a gift, not in revenge. He was able to share his memories, even if these are still dramatic and negative.

Jean said that in African culture the tradition is oral, not written and for this reason it is not possible to ask to him (or others) to write about their experience. He prefers talking over writing about it, but he never did so before this, as he said that the open hurts rest open even after time and sharing.

At the end of his time, all the students were so impressed and touched they could not speak. I ask the students to take time and then to try to share with Jean their feelings, also to try to thank him in a real way. I hope it will yet happen.

I am happy to share this wonderful experience of dialogue and sharing in class. I hope to be able to publish about it in the future. As scholar, I felt that this should be our way of teaching, especially given the discipline of communication we try to teach (and learn). Let's go ahead to try to do the best with our students and in research on this issue. I am still convinced that we may try to re-write history through dialogue.

I am sharing what happened because it is uncommon to talk about the genocide of Rwanda (and Burundi) for people who survived this. It is still too early, as Jean told me. I consider this moment an important effect of dialogue among cultures, as this student chose to share his life with the class and he prepared the lesson on his own, without any help from me. He chose what to say, also decided not to show any pictures of the genocide and he carefully chose the words to describe those days. He also chose to first present the political and historical conditions as a necessary introduction to the genocide.

Afterwards, Jean reported that he felt understood by the class, so probably he was ready to share this moment. In the days since, I have received mails from him and from the others who have expressed their appreciation for that moment. I have the feeling that we built the space for relationship as the basis of dialogue during the course, and that this moment significantly enriched this space.

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