

Maggio 1999

QUADERNI SAVERIANI

Special Assembly of the
Sierra Leone Xaverian Region

SIERRA LEONE

Assemblea straordinaria
della Regione Saveriana
della Sierra Leone

Tavernerio 15-19 marzo 1998

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Com *Mix*

Quaderni Saveriani 101

Special Assembly of the
Sierra Leone Xaverian Region
together with the General Direction

S I E R R A L E O N E

Assemblea straordinaria
della Regione Saveriana
della Sierra Leone
insieme con la DG

(Tavernerio 15-19 Marzo 1999)

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CARISSIMI FRATELLI,

la straordinarietà della vicenda della SL richiede che ci si torni ancora su. Alcuni Saveriani sono stati sequestrati, molti hanno corso pericoli di morte, attualmente sono tutti fuori dalla missione e praticamente tutte le opere della chiesa sono state attaccate. La prospettiva di una pacificazione stabile è molto debole anzi, ci sono ragioni che inclinano a far pensare che il disordine, la violenza e la miseria, in altre parole l'inumanità, continueranno ancora. E qualcosa di simile lo stanno vivendo i missionari in molti altri paesi dell'Africa e negli altri continenti si sono avuti casi e momenti non differenti da questi.

Cosa dice e cosa significa questa situazione per la Congregazione stessa? Tutti dicono che bisogna ricominciare in modo nuovo. Ma come, concretamente? I mali che si sono abbattuti sulla gente sono molto gravi e pieni di conseguenze. Con quale tipo di presenza dovremmo inserirci per alleviare tanta sofferenza e proporre una ricostruzione solida?

L'ultima Congregazione Generale dei Gesuiti ha un testo programmatico che prospetta un'azione pastorale su tre livelli, correlando in maniera stretta l'aspetto sociale con quello culturale e quello religioso e cioè: evangelizzazione, dialogo interreligioso, inculturazione e promozione della giustizia.

Difatti i problemi sociali sono condizionati non dai soli fattori economici e lo stesso sviluppo è il risultato di un insieme di fattori la maggior parte dei quali sono culturali, come per esempio, l'approccio razionale alla natura, l'abitudine ad un'azione collettiva concertata, la disposizione a prevedere e prevenire il futuro, la costanza nei compiti anche secondari e ripetitivi, il rispetto per le cose di tutti, l'osservanza di regole rigorose nella loro gestione, il gusto per le cose ben fatte... Perciò non è sufficiente investire soldi perché ci sia sviluppo in una regione; occorre arrivare a toccare le condizioni che lo rendono possibile e lo conservano (e queste condizioni sono prevalentemente non economiche).

Ma i cambiamenti culturali sono molto lunghi e complessi. Ed ogni cultura, giustamente cerca di resistere alla sua trasformazione: cer-

ca di difendere, come ogni persona del resto, la sua identità. Ora, la cultura è strettamente legata alla religione che ne costituisce quasi l'anima. Nella religione difatti si esprimono e si rafforzano i legami simbolici profondi che legano le persone ad un gruppo, al mondo, alla vita e al senso di tutto ciò. In altre parole: il modo migliore per incidere sul sociale è toccare la cultura; il modo migliore per incidere sulla cultura è toccare la religione.

Noi abbiamo in mano il Vangelo, ossia un messaggio di fede. È talmente potente questo strumento e talmente sconvolgente per la ampiezza e la profondità delle sue possibili ripercussioni che può essere addirittura pericoloso se usato impropriamente (del resto, in passato, è stato usato impropriamente e si può facilmente presumere che anche oggi viene, almeno in alcuni casi, usato impropriamente). La nostra massima efficacia non la raggiungiamo buttandoci direttamente in opere sociali (la salute, la scuola, le strade...), ma esattamente salvaguardando lo specifico della nostra missione, che è religioso. Tenendo il Vangelo come movente e come finalità, ogni nostra azione (compresa l'azione pubblica a favore dei diseredati) diventa correttamente missionaria e costruttrice di umanità.

Il Vangelo offre il più prezioso contributo alla umanizzazione dell'uomo, purché venga portato nella sua pienezza e con l'attenzione a svilupparne tutte le potenzialità. La evangelizzazione di cui c'è bisogno e di cui possiamo farci agenti, non sarà quindi un'attività di massa, non si affiderà ai facili incentivi che stuzzicano l'interesse, non si collegherà a iniziative spettacolari... ma passerà attraverso la scoperta della novità e pienezza del Vangelo e all'orgoglio di esserne portatori gioiosi e disarmati.

Ricominciare l'evangelizzazione in maniera nuova significa affidarsi alla forza debole della Parola, accompagnata dalla testimonianza disarmata di una comunità che vive la carità che annuncia e che celebra.

Cordialmente vostro
Francesco Marini sx

SPECIAL ASSEMBLY OF THE SIERRA LEONE XAVERIAN REGION TOGETHER WITH THE GENERAL DIRECTION

TAVERNERIO, MARCH 15 - 19 1999

Thirty Four members of the Sierra Leone Xaverian Region met together with the entire General Direction at Tavernerio. The only confreres unable to attend were: Bishop George Biguzzi who remained in Freetown, Fr. Victor Mosele in captivity and Fr. Jerome Pistoni in hospital.

There were three movements for the meeting.

1. A Biblical Sharing by Don Bruno Maggioni

2. A review of our presence, our activity and hopes for a future

3. The practical planning and appointing of persons to continue our work, both in the short term as well as in the long term.

1. The afternoon of the first day was dedicated to Don Bruno's first mediation and then personal prayer time. The theme was that it appears that crisis is profoundly a human experience, but also an occasion of restarting and discovering a different aspect of God. The second day began with the second short talk by Don Bruno and the theme was that prayer is a place to discern where God wants us to be. The rest of the day was dedicated to the sharing of the confreres. That sharing raised many feelings, mixed and varied: loss, fear, anger, abandonment of the people and of God, confusion, loneliness, relief, solidarity, hope for a quick return, being overwhelmed, small, insignificant, weak and helpless, shocked, tired, love and care by the people close to us, appreciated and appreciative. It was an opportunity to remember other losses by our Xaverian community in our history. It was recalled by two confreres that when the China

experience of 50 years ended violently and with the expelling of our confreres, our Sierra Leone experience started.

Fr. Marini concluded all the sharing in these words: "These events are very heavy, full of consequences, full of suffering and anxiety, full of hope and ideals. Our way of approach is changing because of the African experience... Burundi, Congo, Sierra Leone... Because of these struggles, sufferings and trauma, we need time to process. We need special help for some... we should not be ashamed to ask for it. We acknowledge that we have been hurt. We cannot go on as if nothing has happened. Feel free."

2. Fr. Rocco Puopolo began the second movement of the meeting with a dialogue reflection with the assembly on questions posed by Fr. Marini which would situate the sharing in a larger context. Then Fr. Puopolo highlighted some historical trends beginning from the time the Xaverian Community first came to Sierra Leone, and joined them to our own Community story through his personal story. The confreres were invited to see pieces of their stories in order to discover patterns of our story which will offer us possibilities for a future story.

3. Then the assembly began sharing information, hopes and plans for a future service to Sierra Leone. It was recalled that it is from a faith perspective that we do this work. The situation is new, possibilities of the past are unlikely, future works are promising. Information was requested and concerns of safety and timing were voiced. The situation in Sierra Leone is still not clear. From the discussion and after a break, a structure for the proceedings emerged. The discussion would address

a. Where are we going and for what purpose?

b. How to do these things?

c. for those who cannot go back to Africa for the time being, what do they do? Two criteria were agreed: that we whatever decisions we make we do this work *as missionaries* and *as a Xaverian Regional Community*. Many realities, needs and directions were shared. After a lengthy and frank discussion, the priorities areas of youth, refugees and Xaverian formation emerged. The following

day was used to further discuss the “where” and the “how” for these three priorities, keeping in mind all the many ever changing factors in this situation. Indications were that youth outreach would be to ex-combatants and war affected youth, starting in Freetown if secure. Refugee work would be in Guinea for a start. And the Xaverian Formation program would be continued, beginning in Lungi where the students presently are. There were helpful discussions on our assistance and attachment to the Major Seminary of Sierra Leone. Only time and security will tell. Time was also dedicated to the possible options available for those who would not be able to return to Sierra Leone in the near or not so near future.

The Regional and General Councils met to select the persons who would begin this outreach and it was announced the first group of Xaverian returning to West, to Conakry to, establish a permanent presence which would be a house of reference and welcome for the community. A second group will follow later on. Others have to wait to see how things develop. Frequent ties will keep the Regional community together through a publication of *SILEX* which will be sent every two weeks. A public appeal was prepared and sent out by the assembly through *MISNA* on behalf of the people and Church of Sierra Leone.

AN APPEAL TO ALL PEOPLE OF GOOD WILL

The Xaverian Missionaries of Italy, USA, Mexico, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Spain and Great Britain who work in Sierra Leone (34 in number) have met in Tavernerio (CO) in Italy together with the General Council of their Congregation from the 15th to the 19th of March, 1999. The meeting was held out of the country, Sierra Leone, due to the recent happenings in the country. They met to explore all the possibilities for a continuation of their work of announcing the Gospel of peace in this beleaguered country.

All the Xaverians of Sierra Leone

1. remain particularly close to the absent confreres:

- Fr. Victor Mosele who has been a hostage for one month.

- Fr. Jerome Pistoni, who is recovering in a hospital from a gun shot wound.

- Bishop George Biguzzi who continues to look for ways of liberating the three religious held hostage as well as finding ways for peace for these people.

2. reaffirm their total commitment in favor of the people and the Church of Sierra Leone especially in this moment of suffering.

3. launch an appeal to all people of good will and the international community that:

- there be an end to the violation of human rights, especially against children;

- there be an end to the trafficking and trade of arms;

- they may support the people of Sierra Leone with emergency aid and where possible to help with reconstruction;

- they may use every effort in places of influence be they political, religious, or economic to bring about a sustainable and permanent peace in Sierra Leone, and in particular;

- they may support the efforts of the Interreligious Council of Sierra Leone in bringing all the parties in the conflict to dialogue in view of peace.

Tavernerio (ITALY) 19 March 1999

APPELLO A TUTTE LE PERSONE DI BUONA VOLONTÀ'

I Missionari Saveriani che operano in Sierra Leone (originari da: Italia, U.S.A., Mexico, R.D. Congo, Spagna, e Gran Bretagna) e che per i noti avvenimenti si trovano attualmente fuori dalla loro missione, si sono incontrati a Tavernerio (CO) in Italia con la Direzione Generale dell'Istituto, nei giorni 15 - 19 Marzo 1999, per esplorare tutte le possibili vie per continuare ad annunciare il Vangelo della pace in questo martoriato paese.

Tutti i Saveriani della Sierra Leone

1. Sono particolarmente vicini ai confratelli assenti:

- P. Vittorio Mosele, da un mese sequestrato;

- P. Girolamo Pistoni, ancora degente all'ospedale a causa delle ferite subite durante il sequestro;

- Mons. Giorgio Biguzzi che, a Freetown, continua a cercare di ottenere la liberazione dei 3 religiosi sequestrati e di trovare vie di pace per questo popolo.

2. Riaffermano il loro impegno totale in favore del popolo e della chiesa della Sierra Leone, soprattutto in questi momenti di particolare sofferenza.

3. Lanciano un appello a tutti gli uomini di buona volontà e alla comunità internazionale perché:

a. cessi la violazione dei diritti umani, specialmente contro i bambini;

b. cessi il commercio delle armi;

c. sostengano il popolo della Sierra Leone con aiuti di emergenza e, dove possibile, favorendo la ricostruzione;

d. si adoperino, in tutte le sedi, per raggiungere una pace stabile in Sierra Leone e, in particolare

e. sostengano gli sforzi del Consiglio Interreligioso per portare tutti i contendenti al dialogo in vista della pace.

Tavernerio (ITALIA) 19 Marzo 1999

LA PAROLA DI DIO IN TEMPO DI CRISI

DON BRUNO MAGGIONI

Ho riflettuto non poco per poter preparare questo incontro. La situazione che avete vissuto, mi ha fatto rivolgere ancora una volta alla Parola di Dio. In essa vedo che l'uomo biblico (e la comunità) si è trovato spesso in situazioni di grande crisi che suscitano domande radicali..

1. La crisi nella Bibbia

La domanda più radicale è quella espressa dal popolo nel deserto: "Il Signore è in mezzo a noi, sì o no?" Questa domanda, in varie forme, è ricorrente nella Bibbia. Alcuni esempi:

"Fino a quando, Signore vedi la violenza e stai a guardare?" (*Ab* 1,2).

Gesù: "Dio mio, Dio mio, perché mi hai abbandonato?" (*Mt* 15,34).

Lo smarrimento dei discepoli di fronte al crocefisso.

I martiri dell'Apocalisse che, sotto l'altare, (strana questa posizione!) chiedono "Fino a quando, sovrano santo e verace, tarderai a fare giustizia?" (*Ap* 6,9-10). La crisi delle chiese dell'Apocalisse, deve essere stata molto forte dal momento che, anche dopo la resurrezione, tutto rimane come prima.

Immaginiamo la crisi sconvolgente causata dall'esilio a Babilonia. Dio aveva promesso fedeltà a Israele, la terra, il Tempio, la 'casa' di Davide... e tutto viene meno.

Anche la Vanità delle cose e della vita e l'inutilità dello sforzo dell'uomo suscita la crisi (*Qohelet*). Quando l'uomo sembra raggiungere un traguardo, tutto svanisce. (La Bibbia poi troverà delle risposte. Non tutto è vanità: la Parola di Dio rimane in eterno - *Is* 40,6-8; la carità non avrà mai fine - *1Cor* 13,8; Dio in Gesù entra lui stesso nella nostra debolezza.

Anche il mio peccato che non riesco a scrollarmi di dosso è fonte di crisi.

C'è poi la crisi tipica di chi gioca la propria vita sulla Parola di Dio (ad esempio, il missionario) che vede che la Parola vera da lui

seminata non dà frutto, mentre le parole false prosperano.

C'è poi la constatazione che la cattiveria sembra diventare sempre più grande ed essere vincente, fino a portare Dio stesso a pentirsi di aver creato l'uomo e a inviare il diluvio – Gn 6,5ss. (Dio poi si pentirà di essersi pentito e porrà l'arcobaleno a ricordo per lui stesso, non per noi, della sua nuova alleanza in favore dell'uomo – Gn 9,15). Si dice che un rabbino, ai discepoli che gli annunciavano che il messia era venuto, andato alla finestra e vedendo che nel mondo nulla era cambiato, scuotendo il capo disse che il messia non era ancora venuto.

2. Di fronte alla crisi, cosa suggerisce la Parola di Dio?

C'è sempre anche una responsabilità della storia e degli uomini (perfino in un terremoto, se per esempio, le case sono state costruite male), e quindi un *giudizio* sulla storia che ha costruito ideologie che fanno disastri e che crollano (come, ad esempio, statua dai piedi di argilla – Dn 2,31ss.). Il Giudizio, però, non è solo condanna, ma ha in sé anche un aspetto positivo, un'opportunità. Per esempio, la crisi dell'Esilio ha fatto fare un salto anche teologico ad Israele. Senza l'esilio sarebbe stato impossibile pensare al Messia come servo sofferente e a Israele come Resto, piccolo ma luminoso.

Per scoprire le opportunità nella crisi e i germi di rinnovamento, bisogna avere occhi limpidi. Bisogna saper vedere il bene anche se piccolo; vedere che se molto seme non matura, da qualche parte però, giunge a portare frutto (cfr. Mc 4,1-20). Occorre accettare la parabola del seme che cresce da solo (Mc 4,26-28). Il tempo tra la semina e il raccolto non è vuoto, ma è occupato dal miracolo di Dio. L'uomo è tagliato fuori, non è più il protagonista, ma Dio opera.

Con la Croce e la Risurrezione l'idea di compimento è diversa da come ce la immaginiamo. Nella croce non troviamo un messia che cambia le situazioni negative, che risolve i problemi. Il compimento c'è, ma è solo in nuce e diverso dal previsto. Non cioè la risoluzione dei problemi, ma il compimento dell'Amore di Dio per il mondo: un amore estremo che non viola la libertà dell'uomo. C'è un compimento nell'ordine della rivelazione e non della realizzazione. E allora

non ci si deve più meravigliare della presenza del male.

La Bibbia suggerisce anche che si deve rispettare lo spazio del grido, del lamento, della ribellione (cfr. Giobbe, i Salmi, Geremia...). La Bibbia dà molto spazio a uomini che si lamentano con Dio, ma nel loro grido rimane sempre il 'filo rosso' della fiducia in Dio. È un lamento sempre rivolto a Dio, come quello del Cristo in croce che grida "perché mi hai abbandonato", ma ha appena detto "Dio mio". Così, per esempio, nel salmo 22 da cui Gesù prende il suo grido. Il salmista è oppresso dal dolore. Dolore fisico, ma soprattutto morale. "Non eri forse amico di Dio?" – gli viene rinfacciato. Ma Dio non interviene. Allora guarda alla storia dei padri: Dio li ha aiutati; è intervenuto in loro favore. Perché ora non risponde? Ripensa anche alla sua storia personale: "Sei Tu che mi hai creato", ma ora sembra che Dio non si ricordi più della sua creatura. Di fronte a queste domande il salmista non ricorre a soluzioni consolatorie. Il mistero rimane intatto, ma lui continua a fidarsi di Dio.

2. La preghiera luogo di chiarificazione e di discernimento

a. Nell'Antico Testamento

Giobbe grida davanti a Dio, come spesso accade all'uomo biblico. In questo libro troviamo tre tipi di preghiera.

(*Gb* 1-2, capitoli in prosa). "Dio ha dato, Dio ha tolto". "Nudo uscii...nudo ritorno" (*Gb* 1,21). Giobbe viene presentato come un modello di fede. Ma è una fede un po' troppo 'edificante'; una fede che non ha attraversato fino in fondo le domande della vita; una fede troppo pronta, rassegnata e 'imparata'.

(*Gb* Parte in poesia) L'innocente piegato e deriso discute con Dio e gli manifesta i suoi turbamenti. Troviamo due espressioni scioccanti: "Tu sei un torrente traditore", (dove si allude ai torrenti nel deserto che sono gonfi di acqua, ma quando ne hai bisogno e vai a cercarla, li trovi secchi) e "Tu annienti la speranza dell'uomo". A Giobbe viene il dubbio di essere stato preso in giro. In Giobbe si rovescia la prospettiva dei salmi che spesso invocano: "Vieni presto, Signore", mentre lui dice: "Allontanati, Signore".

Ci troviamo qui di fronte ad una preghiera diversa dalla prima.

Nel caso di Giobbe, crolla l'idea che egli si era fatta di Dio: un Dio giusto che, quindi, non può permettere il male per chi ha agito retamente. Questa visione è, in fondo, l'idea di Dio che anche gli atei hanno e che vogliono distruggere... Ma mentre crolla questa idea di Dio, un'altra prospettiva si fa strada nella mente di Giobbe: Dio ha seminato nel mondo tanti segni, per cui, anche se non capisco il suo agire, posso fidarmi di lui. Giobbe è giunto a questa conclusione pregando.

Purtroppo, sul finire del libro di Giobbe, l'autore non ha resistito alla tentazione di ritornare alla vecchia idea di Dio... Dio avrebbe voluto solo mettere Giobbe alla prova, ma poi gli dà il doppio di tutte le cose e altrettanti figli come prima. (Al riguardo un rabbino nota: "Io avrei rifiutato questi nuovi figli. Erano quelli di prima che Giobbe amava e la loro perdita non può essere ricompensata").

b. Nel Nuovo Testamento

At 4,24-30. È una delle poche preghiere della comunità cristiana che troviamo nel NT. Nella persecuzione la comunità discerne e, attraverso la Parola di Dio scopre che la persecuzione non è segno di abbandono da parte di Dio, ma che la passione di Cristo continua. Ne consegue che la vera preghiera non è chiedere la fine della persecuzione, ma il coraggio della testimonianza e della franchezza (*parresia*). Questa virtù il cristiano la deve vivere nei confronti del mondo ma anche all'interno della comunità e perfino davanti a Dio (come Giobbe) di fronte al quale non deve comportarsi come schiavo, ma come figlio.

2 *Cor 12,7-9.* Paolo, avvertendo in sé un ostacolo all'apostolato, prega di esserne liberato. Prega con insistenza, in fondo proprio per il bene dell'apostolato stesso. Ma nella preghiera gli viene detto — capisce cioè in modo certo — che l'ostacolo non va tolto ma è necessario perché appaia che è Dio che agisce. (Cfr. visione di Carlo Carretto: gli sembrava di essere una colonna indispensabile alla stabilità della chiesa. Ma poi vide che, anche senza di lui, la chiesa non crollava).

Apocalisse. La comunità è in una situazione di minoranza, di eresia, di persecuzione e di fallimento; una realtà molto cruda e nella quale sembra che l'uomo non impari mai. In questa situazio-

ne, guardando a Cristo, nella preghiera, nella liturgia e cantando, la comunità riesce a recuperare alcune certezze e scopre alcune realtà fondamentali.

Ap 4. Visione del trono di Dio. Prima ancora di raccontare il tumulto della storia umana, l'apocalisse invita a guardare in alto, a colui che, indescrivibile, siede sul trono. Sembra cioè voler dire: "la storia sarà quel che sarà, ma ora guarda in alto e vedi che Dio ce l'ha ancora in mano e che la fine sarà la pace (arcobaleno — *Ap 4,3*).

Ap 5. Visione del libro. Nessuno sa leggere il libro, capire cioè il senso della storia umana. Ma Gesù ne è la chiave di lettura. Guardando a lui, anche se ha vissuto in un luogo limitato e in un periodo breve della storia, si può capire il senso della storia. Anche se l'amore sembra sconfitto e la menzogna vincente, è l'amore che vince. Allora se vuoi partecipare a fare la vera storia, mettiti dalla parte giusta, anche se sembra perdente.

Ap 12. Visione del dragone davanti alla donna che partorisce e al bambino. Tutto sembrerebbe perduto, invece il dragone rimane a bocca asciutta e viene ucciso.

Ap 21. La Gerusalemme celeste con le sue caratteristiche.
scende da Dio:

- non è frutto del lavoro dell'uomo, ma dono di Dio;
- è bella, ma non di una bellezza sua, bensì come riflesso della gloria di Dio;
- è quadrata, cioè completa, ordinata, trasparente;
- è senza tempo (senza chiese), perché Dio stesso abita in essa.

Domande

Di S. Paolo non conosciamo la 'spina nella carne', ma la nostra la conosciamo. Gli viene detto: "ti basta la mia grazia". Cosa significa la 'Grazia'? Il Regno di Dio non dobbiamo misurarlo e pretendere di farlo crescere servendoci di mezzi e potenze umane, in modo da poter dire che siamo noi a costruirlo, mentre è Dio solo che lo costruisce. Se credi in un Dio che è Grazia, non c'è motivo di perdere la fiducia.

Il Regno ha bisogno di strumenti, ma che siano evangelici. Strumenti che il mondo considera deboli e che invece si dimostrano efficaci. Noi siamo sempre tentati, come Gesù stesso nel deserto, di

servirci degli stessi strumenti del mondo. Oggi la principale tentazione della chiesa è la terza di Gesù: quella di dare spettacolo.

Ci sono tante testimonianze positive di bontà, solidarietà ecc., fatti che ci mostrano che il Regno esiste ancora e che non è detto che i mezzi di prima fossero così efficaci. Spesso i missionari parlano troppo poco delle belle cose che hanno visto, e i mass media non sono interessati al positivo che non fa rumore.

Quale il nostro ruolo nella trasformazione della realtà? Dovremmo aiutare gli uomini a capire il giudizio sulla storia, che cioè certi 'valori' portano inevitabilmente l'uomo alla rovina. Purtroppo Apocalisse dice che gli uomini non vogliono capire e vogliono ricostruire sugli stessi 'valori'. Se il 'valore' ultimo sono i soldi, è inevitabile che scoppi la guerra. E se i soldi sono la causa di tutto, perché anche noi missionari vogliamo basare la missione su di essi?

Bruno Maggioni (dagli appunti di un partecipante)

AN OUTLINE OF A CONTEXT FOR OUR DISCUSSIONS

ROCCO PUOPOLO, S.X.

Introduction

1. Some questions which Fr Marini posed to me for our discussion;
2. a walk through the phases of recent Sierra Leone history which we were part of
3. my story as an invitation to your story so we can see "our" story.

It is important to look at our stories in order to then direct our attention to the future. Africa is part of our story. Our looking towards the future can be then seen as something we *choose*, rather than having it chosen for us, often by default. Either we choose what we can, or it is chosen for us, even if what we choose is to "be still" and take time to "regroup" as individuals or as community. We need to give ourselves permission to do what we need to do.

There is a marked difference between "perception" and "reality" and we are often lead to make choices and decisions on perceptions rather than reality. Misperceptions and misconception may have done more damage in this war than reality itself.

1. Questions (I will share some thoughts and you may add)

Where is Africa going?

My thoughts: From what the media is saying, Africa is very dangerous and seemingly falling apart. Sierra Leone today is on the front page of a variety of newspapers, magazines and other media. They are succeeding in painting all Africa as a tragedy. However, I see it simply as "nation building", as difficult as that is. Sierra Leone is

only 38 years old. Young countries are fragile and easily exploited. And the easiest way to exploit is to keep them unstable. Your thoughts: There are also signs of cultural change and the clashes that arise from this. Africa's history includes slavery and colonialism which handicapped it. There is a crisis of leadership. There is the feeling that Western Countries are dividing Africa again.

What are the most grave problems from the cultural point of view?

My thoughts: There is a loss of sense of community due to displacement, an exaggerated mistrust and manipulation of tribal differences, a loss of respect for elders and leadership .. including us as religious leaders. There is a loss of respect for family and institutions where discipline was formed. In Kenema I witnessed a dangerous "marriage" between traditional "defense" forces (Kamajors and the like) with modern weapons and logistics, deployed to areas outside of their traditional boundaries. There is the loss of life rituals. Your thoughts: There is the mis-use of "religious" or "sacred" symbols with no punishment incurred. From the medical point of view, native medicines and practitioners are less. The environment has been ruined.

What type of state or democracy is for Africa?

We have seen colonialism and saw its shortcomings. We have seen multiparty systems and how the confrontations became a means to destabilize the country pitting SLPP against APC against UNPP etc., etc. We have seen benevolent and not so benevolent dictatorships. We have seen military governments. And we are now attempting democracy again.

However, what I would see doable would be a Bintumani Conference type experience. In late 1995 and early 1996 there were two conferences at the Bintumani Hotel, a "palaver" experience where all the facets of society (women, youth, drivers, politicians, clergy, business, media, security forces, etc.) came to discuss the issue of elections first or peace first. The public opinion generated was so strong that elections had to be had. This could be a form of governance. Other issues could be security, development, governance it-

self, youth, etc. The public opinion generated would “direct” whoever would administer the government. How they would be elected to act on behalf of the people would be another matter, but the “parliament” in the true meaning of that word, would be done through this inclusive body of delegates.

Another example of African palaver is the manner in which the African Charter for Human and Peoples Rights is appealed to. It is dialogical. It appeals to that same sense of palaver.

Is it possible to pass to the “modern” without a regard for African Traditions?

It is important to go back to the roots of some traditions in order to understand our present living situation. The stuff of our past is the material of our present.

Do we see an openness on the part of the people to the universality of human rights...?

The universality of human rights is something we need to make them aware of more and more in the face of the violence of war and the deep seated ethnic prejudice that it confirms.

2. Trends in the recent history of Sierra Leone which is also our history.

The 1950's was when Independence was being prepared for. There is a beginning of tension seen when Siaka Stevens walked out of the London talks for independence (seeds of division). Leadership at the time were young elites, educated abroad, sons of chiefs, called upon to govern. It was a time of beginnings for us.

The 1960's began with independence. But then there were the beginnings of coups by military.

The 1970's were a time of hope and development. There were many loans available due to the glut of oil money in Western banks and the desire to loan to newly independent countries. There was the desire to build their infrastructure. We had a benevolent but corrupt dictator. But upcountry, the national government was irrelevant.

In the 1980's there was economic disaster. The OAU in Freetown bled the country of money. There was gross mismanagement, an aging leader (Siaka Stevens) and a change of power to Joseph

Momoh. Corruption was developed into quite a science. However the Mano River Union agreement between Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia was developed and the Economic Community of West African States ECOWAS was begun. These are both positive moves.

The 1990's began with deep rooted discontent with APC government which stirred a revolution and a coup. In 1991 there was an incursion into Kailahun by the RUF. In 1992 the young soldiers drove the APC in a coup and set up a military government. The people rejoiced. The war widened. We witnessed the election of 1996. A peace accord was signed in Ivory Coast. There was continued tension, displacement, insecurity, and now total destruction of even the icon of Freetown. All we built and worked for physically is at risk if not destroyed by now.

3. Our Story

Our strength comes from three sources:

1. Our story...

a. of faith (death resurrection)

b. in community (Xaverian and parish)

c. at ministry

2. Our perspective is from a rural point of view for the most part. This is different from diplomats, politicians and academics to mention a few.

3. Our commitment in love to our people, not as individuals, but as a community.

My story moves through three phases: 1973, a time of great development throughout the North... We were very engaged. 1978-84 was a time when we as a regional community recognized a growing diversity in our memberships and we opened our pastoral presence to Freetown. 1995 to now... a time of tension due to the civil unrest throughout the country, but I also feel that there was tension within the community due to perceptions of lack of solidarity. However there was also the very practical and positive beginnings of our

welcoming of local men to join our community.

My story can be woven into each of your stories which all together create “our” story...s

1. What we witness is good news stories amidst bad news stories... hope in the face of hopelessness... light in the darkness.

2. It may be a time to help the wider world look at issues like gun trade, militarization, corruption, business and what makes it good or bad, as religious leaders. Be aware to have hard facts and information.

3. We can help fill the void which the breakdown of the culture made.

So, looking back at our history and our story may help us strengthen who we are and what we do wherever we may be to serve the people of Sierra Leone.

Fr. Rocco Puopolo, sx

DISCOVERING THE CHRISTIAN CONCEPT OF HISTORY

P. AMATO DAGNINO, SX

We pay homage to the tribulations of all our confreres and all the peoples with whom they are working, who are suffering. Suffering for the love of Christ. The bearing of the Passion of Christ on their own bodies.

It is indeed fitting to find ourselves gathered today, as a community, to consider the divine context of our Mission. This fact is of great significance and exquisitely Christian. This communitarian dimension is an essential part of our Christian living.

We are assembled together to study «the theology of the event/happenings» concerning Sierra Leone, to discover the Christian concept of history underlying the tragedy which is unfolding before our eyes. As believers, we have the grace» to believe that in every happening/event - great or small, happy or sad, joyful or tragic - there is, hidden, the mystery/sacrament of the «will of God», who does not desire that outcome which is called war, violence, calumny, crime, sinfulness - in short mankind's egoism.

In these violent events we have something of the «biblical experience» - God tempting Abraham. Mankind put to the test by God. From eternity, God, the true protagonist of history, through the events of our lives touches the very being of our existence. In the concreteness of this tragedy, war, violence and death, God seeks out that which is useful for our own personal sanctification. What has happened and touched us personally of this experience, should qualitatively change our lives through the recognition of this «Providence» which comes from the Lord. God in the end always comes out victorious, the «Plan of God» supersedes the personal point of view.

From the point of view of «faith», God is always victorious. He

creates from mankind's evil a greater good. God overcomes whatever situation is produced by mankind. «The theology of the event/happenings» requires us to look at our world, from above as opposed from below, with the eyes of God. To seek to find «the point of view» of God in our daily existence, history, events. This biblical doctrine of «Providence» can be seen in the lives of the saints, doctors, mystics who abandoned themselves into the hands of God, none more so than John XXIII and «his» initiative which resulted in the second Vatican Council.

Finally it is only through the Holy Spirit that we can possibly understand, be enlightened as to these events which shape and «sanctify» our lives.

Fr. Amato Dagnino, sx

[Intervention during the first meeting with the missionaries returned from S.L. in Parma (Italy), 9 February 1999. The text is taken from the minutes of the meeting]

FIDELITY TO THE MISSION IN SITUATIONS OF SOCIAL UNREST

FROM A LETTER OF THE GD OF THE MARIST BROTHERS

In recent years other congregations have had to face and deal with war situations. This article is a reflection on the issue by the General Direction of the Marist Brothers.

The visible face of God's love

The main aim of this Circular is to share with you the twofold experience which I have had in the past few years: the experience of the violent deaths of eleven Brothers and the discernment of the mission in times of social crisis and ethnic persecution. I am sure you were all deeply moved by the tragic fate of our Brothers Henri Vergès (Algeria); Etienne Rwesa, Fabien Bisengimana, Gaspard Gatali, Pierre-Canisius Nylinkindi, Joseph Rushigajiki and Chris Mannion (Rwanda); and Servando Mayor, Miguel Ángel Isla, Julio Rodriguez and Fernando de la Fuente (Zaire - ex Congo).

In his apostolic letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, the Pope reminds us that the Church of the first millennium was born of the blood of the martyrs. «It is a witness which must not be forgotten» (n. 37). These pages are intended as my own contribution to ensuring that this wish of the Pope is fulfilled. To the respective Provinces I leave the task of publishing a more detailed biography of the eleven martyrs who have met with violent deaths in Africa since 1994, gathering all the information possible, as a service to the history of the Institute. My intention here is to pay a tribute of gratitude to each of those eleven Brothers who died a martyr's death, thus recalling to your mind and mine the rich legacy that they have left us.

The circumstances of the deaths of our eleven Brothers differed considerably, as did the motives and personal decisions of each of them. But there are aspects which are common to them all: fidelity to Jesus, love of the Institute, solidarity with people who were

suffering and, above all, innocence. They were innocent and defenseless. There was no cause for accusations against them; they were simply violently, some brutally, executed.

Remembering them is a memorial not just for the Institute but for the Church, for they transcended the canonical bounds of the Marist Institute and most certainly belong to the patrimony of the Church and of the many people, especially the young, who feel themselves challenged by their radical option, to death itself.

Henri's was a quiet evangelisation of presence, dialogue and pardon; Etienne Rwesa, Fabien Bisengimana, Gaspard Gatal and Pierre-Canisius Nylinkindi stayed on in Rwanda in spite of the violence which was unleashed in the country on 6 April 1994. They did not feel personally threatened and thought that their presence would benefit the people.

Chris Mannion and Joseph Rushigajiki, fully aware of the risks they were taking, went to the rescue of people in Save whose lives were in danger.

The community of Bugobe decided to remain there out of love for a refugee population who had been abandoned by everyone. The witness of their presence among the refugees and their «love until death» is a special challenge to the young. It makes them, and us Brothers too, aware of suffering humanity and of the urgent need to grow in solidarity. These deaths remind us of the courage of some men and women who align themselves with poor destitute people and who are the visible face of God's love and «living signs of the Father's tenderness» (C 21).

Their testimony, like that of Brothers consecrated-for-mission, can be understood only in the light of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Freely they chose to remain out of love and solidarity with those people who could not flee, and their decision came from the experience of God's love for them and for others. Therefore, their deaths are a sign of life and resurrection for the Institute.

What we must do is not merely collect their relics and erect

monuments to them but imitate them, follow the example of their radicality, their attitude of witnessing, their reasons for living and for their decisions, and ensure that their blood brings forth fruit in the form of action that will live on. Thus we can show that they neither hoped nor died in vain.

Bishop Pedro Casadáliga, defender of the Indians of the Amazons, in one of his pastoral letters in 1996, alerted the people of his diocese to the danger of three temptations that might assail us: forgetting to remember, forgetting the cross and forgetting utopia and hope, allowing ourselves, instead, to be lured by immediate results and the merely pragmatic.

It is amazing the effort which some societies (and even some church groups) make in order to efface the memory of the christian martyrs of their own country. Remembering them is not always a pleasant experience, for it is a judgement on the world which exposes falsehood and sin. Many of these martyrs were champions of human rights, peace and justice and the dignity of each person. By their lives and by their deaths they denounced structural injustice in our society, the victims of which are mainly the poor. «They kill those who get in their way», said Archbishop Oscar Romero, assassinated in El Salvador in 1980, and then they proceed to forget those who got in their way.

In recent times, some local churches have set aside a special day to remember and celebrate the martyrs of the twentieth century. [...]

Martyrdom is a gift

«The Church considers martyrdom the highest gift and the supreme test of love» (*Lumen Gentium*, 42). Rahner describes it as Christian death par excellence. This view of martyrdom has been a constant one in Christian tradition, in theology as well as in praxis and liturgy. Venerating the memory of the martyrs has been important for Christians of all ages. And in the first century martyrs were regarded as exceptional “witnesses” of faith in the Lord from whom

could be derived inspiration and strength, since one could identify with and imitate them.

In the official documents of the Church today there are many references to martyrdom and martyrs. I will quote a few from John Paul II:

«Jesus' love for the world finds its highest expression in the gift of his life for mankind (cf. *Jn* 15:13), which manifests the love which the Father has for the world (cf. *Jn* 3:6). The Kingdom's nature, therefore, is one of communion among all human beings - with one another and with God» (*Redemptoris Missio*, no. 15).

«The supreme test is the giving of one's life, to the point of accepting death in order to bear witness to one's faith in Jesus Christ. Throughout Christian history, martyrs, that is, "witnesses" have always been numerous and indispensable to the spread of the Gospel. In our own age, there are many: Bishops, priests, men and women Religious, lay people - often unknown heroes who give their lives to bear witness to the faith. They are, par excellence, the heralds and witnesses to the faith.» (*RM* no. 45).

Martyrdom is a gift and not at all the result of design, nor is it a way of personal sanctification. It is rather an event in which God manifests the power of his love for the person who gives his life for others. It is the greatest manifestation of the Kingdom of God in this world, and we must know how to understand it, how to absorb and interpret it as epiphany. It forms part of the life of the Church, but it should be considered not so much as heroic deeds in themselves as a permanent interior disposition. The candidate who pushes himself forward for martyrdom risks being suspected of fanaticism.

The English playwright T.S. Elliot, in his play *Murder in the Cathedral* puts into the mouth of Thomas Beckett, the Archbishop of Canterbury who was murdered for his fidelity to the Church on 29 December 1170, the following words: «A Christian martyrdom is never an accident, for Saints are not made by accident. Still less is a Christian martyrdom the effect of a man's will to become a Saint...

A martyrdom is always the design of God, for His love of men, to warn them and to lead them, to bring them back to His ways. It is never the design of man; for the true martyr is he who has become the instrument of God, who has lost his will in the will of God, and who no longer desires anything for himself, not even the glory of being a martyr.»

A new era of martyrs

I am impressed by the list of martyrs in the twentieth century, men and women, young and old, catechists, bishops, priests, sisters, brothers and lay people committed to the cause of peace and justice. To this list must now be added the name of Bishop Juan Gerard, in Guatemala, a relentless defender of the human rights of the indigent people in El Quiché.

Some died not at the hands of “pagan” or “communist” persecutors, but murdered by “christians” whose god is power and exploitation, or who were simply blinded by the violence of war. We are experiencing a new era of martyrs, some of whom are known to us, but there are thousands upon thousands who are known only to God.

Martyrdom is a historic fact which has been present in the Church since the sacrifice of St Stephen till the present day. We are speaking about christians who have suffered violent deaths at the hand of persecutors. The circumstances and external conditions of martyrdom have changed, depending on time and culture but, in essence, the act and the reasons for it remain the same: men and women suffer violent deaths for having opted to be faithful to their christian vocation to follow Christ.

The Church of the twentieth century has martyrs, which is its honour and glory. It is they who give credibility to the Gospel values, for they generate hope and the conviction that it is possible to live as brothers in one human family. What is more, they furnish ecclesial identity in the sense that the Church will be the Church of Christ only to the extent that it is prepared to experience and share

in the destiny of the martyr Jesus Christ.

«In this century, as in other periods of history, consecrated men and women have borne witness to Christ the Lord with the gift of their own lives... thousands of them have been forced into the catacombs by the persecution of totalitarian regimes or of violent groups, or have been harassed while engaged in missionary activity, in action on behalf of the poor, in assisting the sick and the marginalised; yet they lived and continue to live their consecration in prolonged and heroic suffering, and often with the shedding of their blood, being perfectly configured to the Crucified Lord» (Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, no. 86).

For centuries those have been considered martyrs who have freely accepted to die for the faith. The term "Faith" today also encompasses christian morality, as witnessed by the fact that the Church honours as a martyr St Maria Goretti, who died in defence of her chastity. In more recent times the scope of martyrdom has been broadened, thanks largely to Karl Rahner. In addition to martyrdom provoked by hatred of the faith, the Church recognises martyrdom that comes as a result of love and charity or from the exercise of the christian virtues (justice, peace, defence of the poor, of the dignity of life and of other christian realities and values). This widening of the scope of martyrdom is of very real practical importance for a christianity and for a Church striving to live up to their responsibilities regarding justice and peace in the world. (cf. Rahner in *Concilium*, no. 183). The beatification process of Fr. Maximilian Kolbe began by regarding him as confessor and ended with his being canonised as a martyr whose unselfish love led him to take the place of a man condemned to death in the concentration camp of Auschwitz.

Geographic Features

Sierra Leone is located on the West African coast. It borders Guinea to the north and east and Liberia to the southeast. Sierra Leone has a hilly coastline and a mountainous interior. The highest point is Mt. Bondwoman, in the northeast, near Guinea, which is 1,938.3 meters. The climate is tropical. The months between November and May are dry with the *harmattan* (hot, dry wind). The rainy season is from June to October. The average temperature is 81° (27°C) with an annual rainfall from 190 to 330 cm. Approximately 635 cm fall in the Guma Valley near the Freetown coast.

Official Language

English

Other Major Languages

Krio (Creole), Mende, Limba, Temne, Kru, Madinka

Major Subsistence Resources

Rice, cassava, citrus fruits, cocoa, coffee, groundnuts

Major Commercial Resources

Mining (diamond rutile, bauxite, gold), agro-processing, oil refining, light manufacturing, beer

Gross Domestic Product (GDP)

US\$800 million (1994), of which

agriculture composes 47%, industry 18%, and services 35%.

Gross National Product (GNP)

US\$700 million (1994)

GNP per capita

US\$160 (1994)

Total external debt

US\$1.4 billion in 1994 (187% Of GNP). Debt service expenses represented 126% of the value of good and services exported in 1993.

Human Development Index¹

0.176 (1994). Ranked 175 of 175 countries.

Status of women

GDI²=0.155 (1994). Ranked 146 of 146 countries rated. Women's share of earned income was estimated at 29.7% in 1994. Women hold 5% of government posts and comprise 32% of the professional and technical work force (1995).

Education Profile

Tuition for public primary schools (age 6-12) and secondary schools (age 12-18) was abolished in 1987. In 1990, 51% of children of primary school age were enrolled in school (60% of boys and 42% of girls), while only 17% of secondary school age were enrolled (22% of boys and 12% of girls). The country has one university, the University of Sierra Leone. In 1992/93, 2,571 students were enrolled in tertiary education. Adult literacy was estimated at 30% in 1994.

Health Profile

Life Expectancy: 33.6 years (1994)

Infant Mortality: 200 (per 1000 live births, 1994)

Maternal Mortality: 1,800 (per 100,000 live births)

Religious Affiliations

Islam: 30%; Christian: 10%; Catholic: 4%;
Traditional: 60%.

1. *The Human Development Index (HDI) has been developed by the United Nations Development Programme to assess a country's achievement in developing the basic human capabilities of its citizens. It incorporates a number of social indicators related to health, education, and standard of living. It is an average figure and does not reveal distributional inequalities within a particular country.*

2. *The Gender-Related Development Index is similar to the HDI, but it takes account of inequalities in achievement between women and men. As a result, a country's GDI falls if either the achievement levels of both women and men decline, or if the disparity between women and men increases.*

Washington Office on Africa

SIERRA LEONE: TRACING THE GENESIS OF A CONTROVERSY

ABIODUN ALAO

Introduction

Prior to the recent controversy over the transfer of arms, little international attention was devoted to Sierra Leone. Even its civil war, which is at the root of the matter, did not attract any significant attention outside West Africa, despite the fact that it had claimed nearly 50,000 lives. Although its enormous diamond deposits have always attracted some interest, this has been limited to private companies and individual entrepreneurs. Many Sierra Leoneans believe that had there been sustained concern about the predicament of their country, the entire arms controversy might have been avoided.

This briefing paper does not, however, attempt to delve into the complexities surrounding the sale of arms to Sierra Leone and deals only tangentially with the role of mercenaries that has been the subject of so much scrutiny. Rather, it traces the major events leading to the civil war that began in March 1991, bringing with it immense suffering for this impoverished nation. This is a tale of intrigue and power struggles that has involved most of the West African region, and has allowed unscrupulous actors from as far afield as South Africa, Britain and the United States to dabble in the affairs of this country. It is a salutary lesson in the lack of concern about the fate of small nations in the post-Cold War era.

Countdown to breakdown

Sierra Leone's history is littered with instances of political instability and economic mismanagement. The Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) that assumed power after independence in 1961 failed to satisfy the aspirations of the people, and this resulted in the first ever defeat of an incumbent government in post-colonial Africa. This electoral defeat by the late Siaka Stevens' All People's Congress caused disquiet within the military, and it was only after a coup and

a counter-coup in 1967 that Stevens' victory was finally secured with the support of a section of the army. He hung onto power until old age forced him into retirement in 1985, when he was succeeded by President Joseph Momoh. Through successive administrations, corruption, nepotism and fiscal mismanagement remained the order of the day. Thus, while its resource endowment and its relatively small population could have made it one of the richest nations in Africa, Sierra Leone had, by the end of the 1980s, become one of the poorest countries in the world. This weakened the political, economic and social structures, so that, by the beginning of 1990, the disintegration of the country was becoming a distinct possibility.

The military was particularly badly affected by Sierra Leone's gradual disintegration. The coup and counter-coup had taught politicians the decisive role the military could play. For this reason successive governments attempted to recruit people from their own ethnic groups and political affiliations into the army. Ethnic and political considerations became a determining factor in military appointments and promotions - a development that inevitably affected the quality of the force. When a civil conflict eventually broke out in 1991, the national defence force was unable to provide a credible response.

The politics of a civil conflict

The Sierra Leone civil war began in March 1991, when the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), under Foday Sankoh, launched an attack against the government of former President Joseph Momoh¹. Observers have linked the outbreak of this conflict to the civil war in the neighbouring Liberia². Those who hold this position claim that the leader of the Liberian rebellion, Charles Taylor, formed the Sierra Leone rebel movement to punish the Momoh government for joining the ECOMOG peacekeeping mission which was launched by West African states under the umbrella of ECOWAS³. The mission was interpreted by Charles Taylor as an attempt to frustrate his bid for power. It has also been suggested that the Liberian warlord was interested in benefiting from Sierra Leone's diamonds. While these external interests are important, it should be noted that even before the Liberian conflict, a number of Sierra Leonean opposi-

tion groups existed in neighbouring states. Thus all that Charles Taylor seems to have done was to unite these disenfranchised factions under a coherent leadership, and to provide them with arms and financial support.

The RUF began its rebellion from the southeast province of the country, and between 1991 and 1994 concentrated largely on this region. The brutality of the conflict attracted some international attention, while countries in West Africa were particularly worried at the prospect of another state collapse, coming so soon after the disintegration of Liberia. The first practical response to the unfolding developments in Sierra Leone came from Nigeria. The then president, Ibrahim Babangida, sent Nigerian troops to Sierra Leone, ostensibly to reduce the level of the destruction, but in reality to assist former President Momoh, who had been his classmate in military college.

The Sierra Leonean army might have been able to deal with the revolt, had it not been weakened by previous events. Not only had it been undermined by the prior interference of politicians, its strength had been reduced by the transfer of a significant numbers of troops to Liberia as part of the ECOMOG peacekeeping force. To meet the RUF insurgency, the authorities resorted to a mass mobilization of unemployed youths across the country, with disastrous consequences. While the professional soldiers seconded to ECOMOG duties were relatively well armed and paid, the same could not be said of the troops on the RUF front. As a means of survival, these soldiers resorted to the rebels' strategy of terrorizing and looting from the hapless civilians. There were also allegations that President Momoh was not genuinely interested in ending the RUF rebellion, as it provided him with a convenient excuse for indefinitely postponing the holding of elections. However, in April 1992 President Momoh was overthrown by a group of young officers, led by a 28-year-old captain, Valentine Strasser, who headed a National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC).

The NPRC government was initially uncertain as to what policy it should pursue towards the RUF rebels. For their part, the rebels expected to enter into a dialogue with the NPRC and to be incorporated into the government. This assumption was based on the be-

lief that the new leaders, having been radicalized by the war, would want to discontinue the policy of the deposed government. Public opinion in the country, however, felt otherwise, and, basking in the initial popularity that he was enjoying, Strasser decided to continue with the war against the rebels.

Discipline within the military did not improve under the NPRC. There were also allegations that members of the ruling council and other senior military officers took an active interest in the mining and exportation of the country's diamonds. This strengthened the relationship that had developed between the soldiers and the rebels, since both sides were concerned with exploiting the diamond reserves. Many soldiers were also believed to have exchanged their weapons for diamonds from the rebels. Others are said to have withdrawn from their bases, allowing the rebels to take control of diamond-rich areas. Indeed, it was alleged that Johnny Paul Koroma, who later overthrew the elected government and led a military junta, did just this. These events led to a complete loss of faith in the military's determination to fight the rebels, and many Sierra Leoneans decided to take matters into their own hands. This resulted in the creation of civil defence forces across the country, the most important of these being the 'Kamajors'.⁴ It was also during this period that Strasser accepted the offer from Executive Outcomes, the South African mercenary company, to come and complement the nation's defence.

Captain Strasser was overthrown in a palace coup organized by his deputy, Julius Maada Bio, in January 1996. Bio immediately opened negotiation with the RUF to end the war. Côte d'Ivoire, the OAU, the United Nations and a non-governmental organization, International Alert, organized and monitored this peace process. The RUF, for its part, welcomed the development and seemed to enjoy the importance and recognition it had been accorded.

But by the time Bio took over, many Sierra Leoneans had ceased to believe that the army could really end the war with the RUF. The discredited army came under popular pressure to step aside and allow an elected civilian to negotiate a peace process. The Bio government felt otherwise, arguing that there should be a more stable peace in the country before an election could be contemplated. Si-

erra Leone was thus faced with the crucial question of whether peace should come before an election, or the election be held before peace was restored. Bio was finally forced to concede that an election should be allowed to take place, and Ahmed Tejan-Kabbah, the candidate of the Sierra Leone People's Party, was elected to power on 15 March 1996.

The return of democracy: Kabbah and the politics of peace

The first thing to note about the return to democracy is that President Kabbah won against formidable odds. The parliamentary election was won by an alliance led by his party, the SLPP, while his victory at the presidential election came after a second ballot. Many of those who stood against him had been prominent in Sierra Leone's political and economic life for years. Unlike most of his rivals, Tejan-Kabbah was an outsider who had spent most of his adult life as a bureaucrat at the United Nations Headquarters. He thus did not have the firm grip on domestic politics that could allow him to weather the coming storm.

In his domestic policies, President Kabbah took a number of controversial steps. First, he made the tactical error of blaming the civil war on the ethnic groups in the north of the country. During a visit to the area, he asked the people to apologize to southerners for the actions of their fellow northerner, Foday Sankoh, for starting a rebellion in the south. Many considered this a blunder that undermined the country's search for an enduring peace. Furthermore, he was accused of going too far in his attempt to achieve political reconciliation, especially with the inclusion of members of the discredited All-People Congress (APC) in his administration.

President Kabbah's foreign policy was equally controversial. First, he based his regional policy on achieving a close relationship with Nigeria, a country which, although the most powerful in the region, was considered a pariah state because of its military dictatorship and its appalling human rights record. To reinforce his position, Kabbah entered into a defence arrangement with Nigeria. The second important decision he made was to end Sierra Leone's relationship with mercenaries, by terminating the contract with Execu-

tive Outcomes. This decision further deepened the security crisis in the country.

As the army had lost popular support, the Kabbah government decided to place greater confidence in the civil defence forces, especially the Kamajor militias. There was a massive recruitment exercise, and it was believed that the Kamajor militiamen had increased to about 30,000 by the end of 1996. Their commander, Hinga Norman, was made the deputy Defence Minister. Kabbah's close link with them predictably alienated the army, driving it into an even closer alliance with the rebels.

With the encouragement and support of the countries in the region, Kabbah continued the negotiations his predecessor had started with the RUF. This reached its peak in the peace agreement signed between the two sides in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, in November 1996. However, two important developments occurred to derail the peace process. The first was a palace coup within the RUF, which resulted in the alleged overthrow of Foday Sankoh by one Philip Palmer; the second was Sankoh's arrest and detention during a visit to Nigeria to purchase arms. The army saw the two developments as a conspiracy by the new government and its regional ally (Nigeria) to eliminate the RUF, and on 25 May 1997 a coup led by a Sandhurst-trained officer, Major Johnny Paul Koroma, overthrew the fourteen-month-old government of President Ahmed Tejan-Kabbah. The ousted President went into exile in Guinea.

The Koroma coup and its aftermath

It was obvious from the beginning that Koroma and his co-plotters faced formidable popular opposition. Civil servants went on strike, schools and commercial banks closed and the economic and social activities in a normally bubbling society came to an abrupt halt, rendering the country ungovernable. The widespread destruction and looting carried out by the soldiers further damaged the image of the new government.

It was, however, the reaction from the international community that was most profound. As the coup coincided with the holding of the summit of the Organization for African Unity (OAU) in Harare, Zimbabwe, the first reaction was from the continental or-

ganization. It condemned the coup and appealed to ECOWAS to «assist the people of Sierra Leone to restore constitutional order to the country». It is worth noting that this was the first time the OAU had come out so forcefully against a military coup. The Commonwealth, of which Sierra Leone is a member, also condemned the developments and called on the junta to return power to the elected government, while the UN imposed an embargo on the junta. But despite the rhetorical support for democracy and concern about the fate of President Kabbah's government, nothing of substance was undertaken by the international community to actively restore him to power⁵.

Koroma's first decision was to invite the RUF rebels to leave their enclaves to come and participate in his administration. Foday Sankoh was appointed Vice President. Although under house arrest in Nigeria, Sankoh was able to pass instructions to his troops to support the new government⁶ and thousands of RUF members came into the city with their arms. The alliance between the army and the rebels, which had always been known to exist, was formalized by the new military junta. For their part, the Kamajors maintained their loyalty to the ousted president and vowed to see to his return to power.

Controversially, Kabbah now turned to Nigeria for support. At a meeting on 2 June 1997 attended by Nigeria, the British High Commissioner and the junta, a deadline was agreed for the junta to hand power back to Kabbah. To warn it of the consequences of non-compliance, Nigeria launched a pre-emptive bombardment of Sierra Leone. Nigeria claimed that it fired only blank shots, that were designed to indicate to the junta Nigeria's determination to use force if necessary. The junta maintained that live ammunition was used, and that the attack resulted in considerable civilian casualties.

Nigeria's attack raises a number of issues. The offensive was poorly coordinated, as there was no link between the Nigerian navy and the army. At the time the navy launched the attack, there were about 300 members of the Nigerian army stationed in Freetown. These soldiers were fighting the junta and were also supervising the evacuation of foreigners from the Mummy Yoko Hotel. After they ran out of ammunition, the junta arrested them. They were severely

maltreated, and were only released after the intervention of the International Committee of the Red Cross. This hardened the attitude of the junta who became convinced that they could stand up to Nigeria. For its part, Nigeria tactically withdrew to count the cost of its miscalculation, but with the hope that an opportunity would arise to get it right at a second attempt.

As an organization, ECOWAS was divided over how to respond. While there was near unanimity in condemning the coup, some countries, notably Ghana, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso and Benin, were against any form of military action. In fact, President Mathew Kerekou of Benin allegedly advised Kabbah to abandon his dream of returning to power and instead thank God that he had escaped with his life⁷. President Taylor, who had by then taken over power in Liberia, put impediments in the path of Nigeria's military objectives by maintaining that his country could not be used as a base against the junta in Freetown⁸. This did not deter Nigeria, which insisted on enforcing a total blockade on the junta.

Nigeria's motives for intervening in Sierra Leone are still hotly debated. Many ask what moral right President Abacha had to install democracy in Sierra Leone, when he himself staged a coup in his own country and had, since 1993, detained Mashood Abiola, the winner of Nigeria's presidential election. There were a number of factors that explain Abacha's interest. The first could have been the desire to divert domestic and regional criticism away from his own administration. A second might have been the need to keep the army busy, especially after the end of the Liberian civil war, which tied it down for more than seven years. Thirdly, he may have desired to get a hand on Sierra Leone's considerable resources. Finally, it was in Nigeria's interest to install presidents across the region who are dependent upon it for their survival, particularly at a time when plans were well under way for Abacha to metamorphose from military leader into civilian president. Despite his death, the new military administration of General Aboubakar will certainly attempt to follow a similar path.

After considerable pressure, the junta agreed to a meeting under the auspices of ECOWAS to discuss the situation in Sierra Leone. A meeting was arranged in Conakry, Guinea, and in October 1997

the military junta agreed to hand power to the deposed president by April 1998. Other clauses in the agreement include the disarmament and demobilization of fighters, which was to be supervised by ECOMOG, and the formation of a consensus government by Kabbah on his return to power. Koroma and his co-plotters would also not face charges of treason.

Not long after the Conakry agreement was signed, the military junta in Sierra Leone began showing signs of backing out of the agreement. Before the ceasefire was to commence, the junta put forward the argument that the army was a national institution, and that the RUF had already been integrated into it. Therefore, they argued, the issue of disarmament did not arise. Koroma also objected to Nigeria's dominance of ECOMOG, and further made the release of Foday Sankoh by the Nigerian authorities a condition for compliance with the Conakry agreement. As soon as the junta presented these fresh demands, Nigeria lost patience with peaceful negotiations, and decided to remove the junta by force.

The return of Kabbah: the politics and intrigues of a reinstallation

The military operation that removed the junta was complex. Once Nigeria had decided to remove Koroma, it began looking for an excuse that would justify military action. With no mandate from ECOWAS to act against the junta, it could only intervene on the grounds of self-defence. This came in February 1998, when there was an attack on Nigerian forces in Jui. In response, the country launched an all-out attack on Freetown from Lungi airport on the outskirts of the city. Within three days Freetown had fallen. The soldiers and the RUF fled the capital to the hinterland, where they had to contend with the Kamajors. Although there was a spirited attempt to fight back, the disorganized army and the RUF rebels could not provide any credible response to the ECOMOG/ Kamajor alliance.

The regional divisions that had always existed came into play once more. It was alleged that the Taylor government in Liberia provided military assistance to the junta. While this was not confirmed, there was no doubt that Taylor opposed Nigeria's attack on Freetown. Other West African countries believed to be against

Nigeria's military action took consolation from the fact that the crisis was finally coming to an end. Within the country there were still pockets of resistance from the remnants of the junta and the RUF, especially in the diamond-rich provinces, and it took some time before ECOMOG and the Kamajors could spread out across the country. Even now there are persistent reports of atrocities being inflicted on the civilian population by the remaining rebels.

The removal of the junta and the return of President Kabbah was not simply a domestic affair, but the role of the international forces is not only controversial, but also shrouded in secrecy. Although Nigeria carried out the military operation, it is believed across West Africa that the country obtained prior consent from Western countries, including the United States and Britain, before embarking on the mission. There is a strong conviction across the region that the West was willing to overlook Nigeria's unenviable reputation as long as it brought democracy to Sierra Leone.

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of the politics of Kabbah's return has been the role of mercenaries, especially those employed by Sandline International. The allure of diamonds lies at the heart of the issue. The involvement of the mercenaries can be traced back at least as far as January 1995, when the rebel forces shut down a titanium ore mine owned by the Ohio-based Sierra Rutile. The company called in Gurkha Security Guards. This experiment was only partially successful, since the Gurkhas stuck to the terms of their contract and refused to go on the offensive against the rebels.

In April of the same year, Sierra Rutile teamed up with Branch Energy, another company with mining interests in Sierra Leone, to bring in Executive Outcomes of South Africa, which also supplied mercenaries. This received the endorsement of Captain Valentine Strasser. The terms of the agreement were that the mercenaries from Executive Outcomes would go on the offensive against the rebels, in return for a guaranteed profit of \$1.5 million a month from diamond mines in the Kono district. Once Executive Outcomes entered the scene, the balance of power changed. They used the Kamajors as scouts and, within a short time, were able to push the RUF back, tilting the conflict in favour of the Strasser government.

Tejan-Kabbah's decision to end the contract with Executive

Outcomes undermined his security and allowed the coup to take place, sending him into exile in Guinea. There he came to the conclusion that the mercenaries would have to be employed if he was to return to power. As the resources of the state were no longer under his control, he had to rely on foreign businessmen whose mining interests have been affected by the instability in the country. This brought Rakesh Saxena into the picture. An Indian businessman with considerable mining, fishing and telecommunication interests in Sierra Leone, he agreed to finance Kabbah's return to power. Sandline met with Saxena and arrangements were made to export arms to Sierra Leone. In the event the arms probably played only a minor role in President Kabbah's return, which was mainly attributable to the Nigerian intervention.

Conclusion

British concern now focuses almost exclusively on the role of the mercenaries and the tangled relationships that were formed between their many front companies and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. The media have become obsessed with questions of what ministers knew and when they knew it. For the people of Sierra Leone these concerns are all but irrelevant. They saw their democratically elected president overthrown by a military coup. They saw him in exile in Guinea without the means to return to power. In their eyes he did what he had to in the circumstances. For them, the UN arms embargo was an irrelevance, of interest only to those who had already solved the problems of poverty, hunger and insecurity. Yet behind these immediate concerns and the admittedly marginal role played by Sandline, there lie some much larger questions. To what extent should private security agencies be allowed to determine national destinies? Africa, after all, has a long and very unhappy history of mercenaries, almost going back to the beginning of the era of independence. To what degree should external intervention be welcomed, whatever the domestic situation might be, and does the nature of the intervening state matter in terms of the regional implications of the intervention? In short, do ends justify means or are the means themselves of intrinsic significance to the final outcome? The recent experiences of Sierra Leone suggest that

a sustained interest in African affairs might have ensured that some of its mistakes could have been avoided and much of the suffering of its people averted. And that, in short, should be the real objective of diplomacy in the contemporary developing world.

¹ Foday Sankoh was a Corporal in the Sierra Leone Army, who, after serving a jail term for an attempt to overthrow the government of former President Siaka Stevens, went into exile.

² The Liberian conflict began in December 1989.

³ ECOMOG is the Economic Community of West African States Ceasefire Monitoring Group, which was initiated by the regional grouping, the Economic Community of West African States, ECOWAS, to deal with the crisis in Liberia. It has subsequently become the military wing of ECOWAS, performing tasks set for it by the region's leaders.

⁴ These are mainly local hunters who believe in supernatural and ancestral powers.

⁵ The 1997 United Nations resolution 1132 on Sierra Leone expressed support for the democratically elected government, and demanded that the military junta relinquish power to it, while insisting that there should be a 'peaceful restoration of the constitutional order.' Since the junta had no intention of giving up power, this amounted to little more than a platitude.

⁶ He was able to pass on this message to his troops before the Nigerian authorities saw the need to disconnect the phone in his place of house arrest.

⁷ Friday Abbah, 'The Fall of Koroma', *Punch*, 16 February 1998.

⁸ Practically, Liberia would have been the best base, since Nigeria still had its ECOMOG troops in the country.

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SAVING SIERRA LEONE

JOHN HIRSCH

Following 30 years of ruinous mismanagement and nine years of civil and cross-border conflict, Sierra Leone is in profound crisis. The virtual collapse of the Sierra Leonean government and the military impasse between the Nigerian-led West African peacekeeping force, on one side, and Revolutionary United Front rebels and remnants of the former army, on the other, present the international community with a stark situation. After years of international indifference, the Western media have given prominent coverage to the atrocities, destruction and violence inflicted on the civilian population.

There has recently been a renewed call for the return of Executive Outcomes, the private security force that had maintained a measure of security through early 1997, to join with the peacekeeping force in defeating the rebels. This in itself is, however, insufficient. Sierra Leone needs a coherent and comprehensive strategy, rather than the reactive, piecemeal approach that has characterized the international response to the crisis to date. President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah's government and the peacekeeping force must continue to be supported by the international community while a long-term effort at ensuring security and peace is undertaken.

Broadly speaking, there are four conceivable scenarios. First, a peacekeeping force victory over the rebels; second, a rebel victory over the peacekeeping force; third, a protracted stalemate, with peacekeepers in control of Freetown and its environs and the rebels in control of the north and east of the country; and fourth, an internationally negotiated and enforced political settlement.

Of these scenarios, the first seems more and more unlikely. While the peacekeeping force continues to constrain rebel operations, the American experience in Vietnam suggests that wars against deter-

mined guerrilla forces are rarely conclusive. Moreover, the Nigerians have announced their intention to leave or draw down their forces significantly when a civilian government comes into office in May. The rebels retain the capacity to keep fighting, apparently with external support.

The second and third scenarios portend a dismal future for Sierra Leone. If the peacekeepers withdraw and the rebels take over, Sierra Leone will descend into a reign of terror and violence. The third scenario would be tantamount to *de facto* partition. It would leave a significant part of the country in a no-man's land under rebel control. These two scenarios presage further social and economic disintegration, and more refugees and displaced persons—now more than 1.5 million, according to U.N. humanitarian sources.

The best scenario for Sierra Leone is an internationally negotiated political settlement, agreed on by both Kabbah's government and the rebels. An international settlement is essential because the regional states have a stake in the conflict that renders them less than impartial. U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan, as convener, would give legitimacy and credibility to the proceedings.

The foundation for an international settlement of the Sierra Leone conflict is embodied in the Nov. 30, 1996, Abidjan accords between the Kabbah government and the rebels. Though never implemented, the accords remain valid and viable. Kabbah repeatedly has indicated his readiness to implement the accords, provided the rebels cease hostilities and recognize the legitimacy of his elected government.

The Abidjan accords include provisions for the demobilization and disarmament of the rebel and

Government armies and the opportunity for the rebels to transform themselves into a political party eligible for the next general election. While many Sierra Leoneans will find it repugnant to envisage the rebel group—whose members have committed gross human rights abuses against the population—as a political player,

the fact remains that the rebels signed the Abidjan accorda.

The U.N. secretary general should convene an international conference on Sierra Leone to include the Kabbah government and the rebels, key African participants, the Commonwealth (components of the former British empire) and the permanent members of the U.N. Security Council. The major objectives of the confrence would be to:

- (1) secure a cease-fire and end hostilities (again),
- (2) facilitate implementation of the Abidjan accords or their revision as the basis for the peace settlement,
- (3) strengthen and enlarge the U.N. civilian mission in Sierra Leone to assist the government in providing essential services, (4) ensure financial support for the continued presence of the peace-keeping force and
- (5) reach an agreement on the timing and modalities of the next election, in which the rebels would be allowed to participate as a political party.

The key to this effort lies with Nigeria and its peacekeeping partners. They need assurance of financial resources to remain engaged. A timetable would have to be established for the peacekeepers' continued stay in Sierra Leone. This would make it somewhat easier for the new civilian government in Nigeria to continue to commit troops. The rebels and their external supporters have to be convinced that they cannot conquer Sierra Leone nor gain international legitimacy by force of arms. Conversely, participation in the peace process will provide them with access to international funding for reconstruction and recovery (essentially what is in the Abidjan accords).

International pressure must be exerted on Charles Taylor, the president of Liberia, to cease military support for his rebel allies. Within an international conference, he would be given the opportunity to play the role of regional peacemaker collaboratively with others.

In sum, all participants need to be convinced of benefits not

only for Sierra Leone but also for themselves. At the same time, an enforcement mechanism has to be put in place to ensure that the accords remain on track.

While this may seem a great deal to demand from the international community, it is primarily a revival of the Abidjan accords on an international rather than regional basis. The increased role for the U. N. civilian mission will need organization and financing.

There is still time to save Sierra Leone. This proposal can work if implemented speedily. But if an effort along these lines is not adopted, one must fear the worst for the future of democracy in Africa and the well-being of the people of this beautiful but beleaguered country.

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[The writer, a former U.S. ambassador to Sierra Leone, is vice president of the International Peace Academy.]

TRYING TO LOCATE THE GROUND OF MY BEING

JAMES TULLY, SX

My experience was a Xaverian experience. One hundred years ago we began our work in China. Who could have imagined that it would come to an abrupt end in fifty years? This experience gave birth to our involvement in so many places. One of them was Sierra Leone and who could have imagined that it would come to such an abrupt stop in fifty years!

The agonizing question, why has God let this happened? Where was He? Why hasn't this God who heard the cries of the People of Israel, not hear the cries of the People of Sierra Leone who have made persistent entreaties over the last eight years? I have been eleven years in Sierra Leone, but it is during the last five years in Magburaka Parish, working in the Matotoka and Makali area, that I have seen the destruction this war has caused for the people of Sierra Leone.

The rebels attacked Magburaka for the fourth time on 23rd December 1998 at nine fifteen. I ran into the bush to the village of Mamomu where I had already taken refuge before for three weeks at the beginning of the year. But after a few days the rebels set up a camp in Magburaka. They weren't moving away. After a week I fled to Mile 91, distant about 30 miles, and then went to Bo and flew to Lungi. During these two months, I've experienced a whole range of feelings. But the greatest is one of loss.

1. My ministry was becoming more and more my way to express my love of and commitment to God. It was fulfilling. The small villages around Matotoka were beginning to respond. The newly confirmed Christians had begun to take responsibility for visiting and praying in eight villages. The weekly Bible prayer group had begun its fourth year. All was making my life full. It came to an abrupt end on 23rd December.

2. I feel a loss because I was not able to talk to the prayer leaders, the elders, the youth and the women, all the friends who were so central to the small Christian communities. Because I didn't have the chance to say good-bye, there is an unresolved grief hanging over my head almost like when you are bereaved and don't know how to mourn your loss.

3. Then there is another type of loss. In my mission work, I imagined my commitment being total. I was ready to suffer for Christ. But when the time came, I ran away. I feel that I have compromised my ideal and feel the guilt of one who placed survival above other things. I got away and left the others behind to continue in their sufferings. What do the people think of me now!

4. Finally, there is another type of loss - the loss of control over your life. I feel like a refugee. I fled Magburaka, leaving everything. I was told to go to Mile 91, I was told to go to Bo, I was told to go to Lungi, I was told to go to Conakry, I was told to go to Rome... I have been up-rooted. I don't have a stable place to call my own. I'm not in control of what is happening to me and my future. I am in-between and feel that insecurity and imbalance.

These are some of the feelings that have resulted from my upheaval due to the rebel attacks. They are there, unresolved, causing a lack of decision, and direction. I need time to locate the ground of my being once again in a God who does not give answers the way I want, but just tells me and us that He is there.

James Tully, sx

VENTI GIORNI DA RICORDARE

P. GIUSEPPE BERTON, SX

L'avanzata dell'Ecomog da Est ci costrinse all'ultima fuga incominciata a piedi e poi con macchine requisite dalla Polizia Militare. La solita corsa accompagnata da insulti, ostacolata da carcasse di macchine requisite dalla Polizia, da gente in fuga e da innumerevoli posti di blocco. A stento la Polizia riusciva a farci passare. Si facevano sempre più evidenti i segni di una anarchia che continuerà a diffondersi attraverso tutti i ranghi. Alcuni forsennati si sentivano in dovere di dirigere il traffico a colpi di pistola. La gente sbandava sempre più ed il caos aumentava. La Polizia parcheggiò le nostre macchine nel retro di una casa a più piani e, protetti come eravamo dalla mura di cinta, ci sentivamo relativamente sicuri dagli spari, ma non da eventuali gruppi di esaltati che, frustrati dall'avanzata dell'Ecomog, potevano cercare sfogo alla loro frustrazione avventandosi su di noi. Ce l'avevano promesso più volte:

“Se dovessimo essere costretti a ritirarci, con noi morirete tutti voi!”

Era una minaccia che stava avverandosi. La Polizia si sentiva quasi sovrastata dagli avvenimenti e correva ai ripari come meglio poteva, ma, per quanto i più responsabili e volenterosi cercassero di proteggerci, la situazione si rendeva sempre più difficile e pericolosa. [...]

Una nuova emergenza! Ancora una fuga, ma le macchine non bastavano. Per prime furono fatte salire le sorelle. Con loro salirono Guri e Girolamo. Gli Indiani presero posto nella seconda macchina e noi?.. L'Arcivescovo, P. Mario, P. Luis, io ed altri, comprese le due bambine che facevano parte del corteo di P. Mario, in tutto tredici o quattordici persone, improvvisamente ci trovammo soli nel cortiletto della casa ad attendere lo svolgersi degli avvenimenti. [...]

Di fronte alla casa, una barriera di fuoco e di fumo, creata per impedire a qualsiasi veicolo di procedere, proteggeva la ritirata dei

ribelli. Il fumo nero delle macchine che bruciavano aumentava sempre più e ci fece ricorrere ai fazzoletti per poter proteggere la respirazione.

La fuga fortunosa

Quanto tempo abbiamo passato in attesa tra la casa e la mura di cinta? Non lo so. Tutto intorno calò un silenzio che prometteva ben poco di buono, un silenzio che non sapevamo come interpretare. Nel silenzio, una voce incoraggiante ci apostrofò:

“È bene che entriamo in casa”.

Doveva saperla lunga perché si mostrava molto sicuro di sé. Entrammo in un locale che aveva tutto l'aspetto di un seminterrato allestito ad abitazione. Era spazioso, ma povero di ventilazione. Si presentò: Sonny e i suoi tre amici. Evidentemente erano del posto, perché, come avrei potuto rendermi conto più tardi, conoscevano tutti gli angoli, scorciatoie, vie di entrata e di uscita del rione.

“Non possiamo rimanere qui - continuò Sonny - ritorneranno a cercarci”. Non era difficile immaginarselo. I due ostaggi più importanti erano con noi: l'Arcivescovo che tanto odiavano e che difficilmente sarebbe uscito vivo dalle loro mani e P. Mario, “merce di scambio”. Volevano infatti, per il suo rilascio il telefono satellitare, medicine ed altro. Era rimasto tra noi anche il più anziano parlamentare della Sierra Leone, Mana Paca, 79 anni. Per essersi pronunciato apertamente contro i ribelli, lo avevano portato via da casa in pigiama, ormai lurido e macchiato di sangue. L'avevano torturato fino a rompergli un braccio. Il povero vecchio camminava a stento, e Dio solo sa, quanto abbia sofferto in tutti i trasferimenti. Recitava in continuità il Rosario. Anche lui difficilmente se la sarebbe cavata se fosse caduto ancora in mano ai ribelli.

“Abbiamo allestito una Nissan Patrol”, continuò Sonny. Forse era la macchina destinata a noi e che non erano riusciti a mettere in moto. Un anziano meccanico l'aveva accomodata e Sonny voleva improvvisare una fuga, quasi fuori della realtà, una fuga di quelle che si possono vedere soltanto nei film. Obiettai! Chi era poi questo Sonny? Non ci avrebbe messo in un pasticcio ancora più grosso?

Partire con una macchina che nel silenzio che ci circondava sarebbe certamente stata notata, non ci poteva far cadere in una situazione irreparabile? Non ci avrebbero sparato, dovendo passare proprio davanti alla barriera di fuoco e di fumo?

“È un rischio che dobbiamo correre - continuò Sonny - ed è ben difficile che ci sparino contro perché è la loro macchina”.

P. Mario mi assicurò che Sonny sapeva il fatto suo. Non ho mai appurato come P. Mario fosse arrivato a questa conclusione, ma accettai il suo giudizio. “Fra cinque minuti... siate pronti!”

In fretta, in fila indiana, curvi ed attenti agli ordini, ci infilammo nella Nissan Patrol. Aveva ben da dire Sonny, che si era messo alla guida: “Tenetevi giù, non fatevi riconoscere”.

Eravamo troppi, e non c'era spazio per accovacciarci. Fece contatto con i due fili che penzolavano e con un rombo, che a me sembrò ignominiosamente rumoroso, la Nissan si lanciò verso la strada che si trovava a pochi metri. Sterzò violentemente a sinistra, prese una velocità pazzesca, schivò il fossato delle tubature dell'acqua che solcava la strada, fece marcia indietro per guadagnare la salita che conduceva a Thunder Hill, accelerò ancora una volta e, traballando come se fossimo in alto mare, incominciò a salire. Non ancora contento del tracciato, perché troppo esposto, Sonny s'infilò nell'abitato, prese la direzione della caduta dell'acquedotto e forzò la macchina al massimo. Questa non poté reggere ed una gomma posteriore scoppiò. Cercò di continuare a salire ma, *miracolosamente*, non ce la fece. Miracolosamente perché Sonny era deciso a raggiungere la cima della collina distante non più di settanta o cento metri. Sarebbe stato fatale per tutti noi perché, stagliati contro l'orizzonte, richiamati dal rumore della macchina e dallo scoppio della gomma, apparvero tre ribelli. [...]

Il sangue freddo di Sonny

Ci trovavamo in una situazione che solo il sangue freddo di Sonny poteva adeguatamente affrontare. I tre ribelli apparsi sul ciglio della collina non ci permettevano certo di continuare in quella direzione, a meno che non intendessimo consegnarci nelle loro mani.

“Aprite la porta di sinistra e tenetela aperta - ordinò Sonny ai suoi due compagni - Non uscite dalla destra, ma dalla sinistra e dal retro”, ordinò a noi mentre si apprestava, walky-talky alla mano, ad affrontare i ribelli. Perché non dalla destra? Una lunga fila di ribelli camminava sul ciglio della collina! dall'altra parte della valletta, stagliandosi contro il cielo. Tra tanti, qualcuno poteva pure sospettare di che si trattava e fare fuoco. Quasi a dare l'impressione che obbedivamo a malincuore, sgusciammo fuori dalla macchina e ci dirigemmo verso l'abitato non molto lontano. Nella nostra fuga avevamo infatti oltrepassato le ultime abitazioni.

E Sonny? Ce lo raccontò in seguito. Il walky-talky che aveva recuperato da una macchina abbandonata, più il suo modo di vestire, gli davano tutta l'apparenza di chi apparteneva alla Polizia Militare ed approfittando dello stupore dei tre ribelli, li apostrofò seriamente, dando loro da intendere che aveva una missione speciale da portare a termine e chiedendo loro di coprirgli il fianco. Poi ci raggiunse e, come se nulla fosse capitato, ci fece attendere dietro una casupola di lamiere finché andava ad esplorare l'abitato. Sono certo che dietro a quelle lamiere qualcuno tratteneva il respiro per non farsi sentire, magari premendo una mano sulla bocca di un bambino perché non li tradisse. Sonny ritornò. Candidamente ci disse che aveva cercato rifugio in casa dei suoi e che sua madre temeva troppo per la famiglia. Capii allora perché quei luoghi gli fossero tanto famigliari. Doveva cercare un posto per la notte. Nel frattempo ci eravamo avvicinati ad un abitato non finito. Aveva il tetto, ma mancavano le finestre e le porte. Questo non ci permetteva di chiuderci dentro al riparo dagli occhi indiscreti di chi potesse passare, magari gli occhi di qualche ribelle che vagava nell'area. Ancora una volta, Sonny ed i suoi dovevano trovare una soluzione. Intanto, a non più di centocinquanta metri, i ribelli sfilavano sul ciglio della collina per portarsi fuori tiro dell'Ecomog.

“P. Mario, posso avere la tua pila?” E con questa in mano, imperiosamente ordinava ai ribelli di non sbandare, di proseguire nel sentiero che con il raggio della pila ordinava loro.

“Ma io abito laggiù!”, si fece sentire una voce di donna, ma Sonny

era inflessibile. Nei momenti di pausa, si rassicurava con un fischio che tutto andasse bene dalle nostre parti. Aveva messo a farci da piantone uno dei suoi ragazzi. Ogni mezz'ora circa veniva ad assicurarci che tutto andava bene, che non c'era nulla da temere. Ancora una notte, e finalmente... le prime luci del giorno.

Giù dalla collina

Non potevo farcela. Non credevo di farcela! Ma, non so come... arrivai anch'io! "Non possiamo rimanere qui, non possiamo rimanere due notti nella stessa casa, ci redargui Sonny. Ed io, che ben volentieri avrei passato il giorno e la notte successiva in collina, dovetti dargli ragione. Via di corsa, a saltoni, fra un sasso e l'altro, evitando ora un rigagnolo, girando poi l'angolo della prima casa, ci infilammo in una viuzza che portava su una specie di strada e finalmente, quando ormai avevo quasi deciso di arrendermi, arrivammo alla nuova destinazione. Era ancora troppo buio per renderci conto di dove di trovavamo.

"Sotto le banane!", suggerì una delle nostre guide.

"No! – redargui Sonny – Possiamo aspettare nella veranda, ma state giù, perché la gente sta alzandosi e non voglio che nessuno sappia della vostra presenza".

Ci trovavamo infatti all'incrocio di due vie, tutte e due battute dai ribelli. Dieci minuti di attesa ed un suo amico venne ad aprirci la porta di casa. *Piatton piattoni* ci portammo all'interno per passare una giornata interminabile, circondati dai ribelli e sotto il tiro dei mortai dell'Ecomog. Fuori, Sonny ed i suoi intrattenevano i ribelli con sigarette e whisky, tra una chiacchierata ed una risata. Dove l'aveva mai trovata quella preziosa bottiglia?

"Tutti nel ripostiglio!", venne l'ordine secco. C'era da soffocare, ma Sonny voleva aprire per un po' di tempo le finestre per dare da intendere ai ribelli che non c'era nessuno in casa.

"Nella stanza da letto! Presto". E la chiuse debitamente a chiave. Ci spiego più tardi, che non voleva creare dei sospetti in un amico che gli aveva fatto cenno di voler entrare. Non era una brutta idea quella di Sonny. Voleva contattare l'Ecomog perché con una punta-

ta strategica venissero a liberarci. Ci accorgemmo più tardi che era come chiedere ad un elefante di muoversi da gazzella. Per le strutture dell'Ecomog ci volevano due giorni per organizzare un simile salvataggio e noi certamente non potevamo rimanere nello stesso posto per due giorni consecutivi. Tra l'altro, la realtà era che noi "valevamo" ben poco per l'Ecomog. Due giorni dopo incontrammo Sonny alla sede del comando militare e, con il biglietto in mano firmato dall'Arcivescovo, cercava di sollecitarli ancora ad intervenire. Non rimanemmo lì la notte. Era troppo pericoloso. Eravamo troppo esposti. Purtroppo senza Sonny ci sentivamo più vulnerabili, ma anche chi lo sostituiva dimostrò di sapere il fatto suo. Dopo aver esplorato il vicinato, con un lungo giro di casa in casa, scendemmo verso la strada per passare la notte nel seminterrato da dove avevamo organizzato la fuga. Trovammo il vecchio parlamentare Paca ancora lì. Ferito com'era, non avevamo potuto portarcelo con noi, ma Sonny l'aveva raccomandato ad un amico. Lo lasciammo ancora una volta, per trovarmelo più tardi all'ospedale, atteso da una vecchia conoscenza.

"Lo conosci il povero vecchio?" Fece una lacrima. "È mio padre!", mi rispose.

Quanto è piccolo il nostro mondo – pensai fra me – Quante cose si risolverebbero se la gente si parlasse!"

La sua presenza, la presenza del parlamentare Paca, ci confermava che i ribelli non erano più ritornati sul posto, che forse ci avevano dati per perduti. Forse avevamo corso tanto invano. Forse ci eravamo esposti a tanti pericoli inutilmente. Forse..., forse... quanti forse ci martellavano in testa. Ma le spie erano tante ed era anche possibile che avessimo salvato il povero vecchio, che qualcuno avesse riferito ai ribelli che eravamo scappati, che avevamo abbandonato quella casa, che dovevano cercarci su per la collina. Il fatto sta che ci cercavano ancora.

L'agguato

Dovevamo raggiungere l'Ecomog al più presto... su questo eravamo tutti d'accordo. Ma dov'era l'Ecomog, dove erano i ribelli? Esplo-

rarono la strada che sembrava deserta. Più in basso, verso la strada nuova, la gente sembrava muoversi tranquilla... “accompagnata dai militari dell’Ecomog”, ardi di aggiungere qualcuno. Cinquecento metri, non più di un chilometro ci separavano dalla libertà. Valeva la pena correre il rischio. L’ultima sortita ci sarebbe certamente riuscita. Infilammo la strada che corre verso il cimitero, dietro le casette utilitarie del “Low Cost” e, protetti da queste – temevamo infatti che qualche pallottola ci raggiungesse – ci dirigemmo verso la nuova strada. All’altezza della scuola elementare dei Wesleyani, prendemmo la destra, abbandonando così la protezione delle abitazioni. Si apriva davanti a noi un grande cortile, il cortile della scuola. Ancora questo, solo questo e saremmo entrati sulla strada asfaltata, tenuta dall’Ecomog.

“P. Mario, P. Mario!”... tra grida e spari, un’orda di ribelli uscì dalla protezione delle aule scolastiche e si lanciò nella nostra direzione. A noi si era aggiunta altra gente. Si ruppe la fila e fu un corri corri forsennato per poter raggiungere il riparo dell’abitato. Alla mia destra cadde il P. Luis, che a fatica si riprese. Non lo vidi, perché anch’io avevo il mio da fare per mettermi al sicuro, ma, come mi fu raccontato più tardi, alla mia destra cadde l’Arcivescovo. Non riuscì ad alzarsi. Fu raggiunto dal ribelle più avanzato, che gli gridò di rimanere seduto. Voleva che questi raggiungesse anche il P. Mario, quando una folla di giovani gli si riversò contro e dovette fuggire.

“Il vescovo, il vescovo”, gridò P. Mario. Certamente i ribelli non potevano più trascinarselo dietro, ma potevano ancora ficcargli in corpo una pallottola. A valanga i giovani si lanciarono avanti e lo trassero in salvo. Io non ne potevo più. Avevo raggiunto la prima casa, l’aggirai e non sapendo se scappavo o mi inoltravo verso i ribelli, mi nascosi dietro le lamiere di un gabinetto che si trovava dietro la casa, un po’ per tirare il fiato, ma anche per rendermi conto da che parte dovevo dirgermi. Entrò un piccolino che nascosi dietro di me. Fuori una mamma, carica di un bambino sulla schiena, cercava con ansia il più grandicello che aveva perduto.

“È tua mamma?”, chiesi all’omino che mi si aggrappava ai pantaloni.

“No!”, mi arrivò una vocina esile ed impaurita. “Allora sta fermo!”, gli dissi io di rimando.

Si fece silenzio. Quanto durò? Per me un tempo interminabile. Improvvisamente scoppiò un nuovo pandemonio. “È finita. A due passi dalla libertà. Non così”, dissi tra me.

Da un buco delle lamiere cercavo di interpretare la situazione. Un gruppo di “ribelli” avevano visto spuntare da una porta la canna di un fucile nigeriano. Lo agguantarono e con forza lo strapparono dalle mani di chi all’interno opponeva resistenza. Una legnata ben assestata divelse un paio di lamiere del mio nascondiglio. Era più prudente che mi arrendessi. Invece di una legnata, avrebbe potuto raggiungermi una raffica di mitra. Mi presentai con le mani alzate.

“Sono un padre!” e, di rimando dalla folla: “P. Berton!” Ero stato riconosciuto, ma ancora non mi ero reso conto da chi. Non erano i ribelli quelli che avevano agguantato la canna del fucile. Non erano i ribelli che avevano divelto le lamiere del mio nascondiglio. Non erano i ribelli che mi stavano davanti. Erano i giovani che si erano costituiti in “Unità di difesa civile”. Mi presero per mano e mi accompagnarono per tutto il miglio che mi separava dal comando locale dell’Ecomog.

“Qui abita mia zia”, mi disse Elis che mi accompagnava per mano. “Se vuoi puoi fermarti”.

“No. Per favore, fammi raggiungere gli altri”. “Almeno un bicchiere d’acqua!”

Anche per mostrare la mia riconoscenza, mi fermai a bere un bicchiere d’acqua. Mi guardavano con degli occhi stralunati. Non mi ero ancora reso conto quanto lunga fosse la mia barba e quanto fossi sporco. Procedevo sulla strada asfaltata, sempre tenuto per mano da due giovani, quando mi corse incontro Ramatu con dei grossi lacrimoni agli occhi. “Tutti bene i bambini?”, le chiesi. “Tutti bene”, mi singhiozzò di ritorno.

Più tardi, assieme a Patrizia, mi avrebbe raggiunto al posto di comando per portarmi qualcosa per rifocillarmi e per presentarmi

un anziano che l'aveva ospitata dal giorno che era fuggita dalla sua dimora. Qui incontro gli altri, eccetto il vescovo, che avevano accolto in una casa vicina dove una infermiera trattò le sue ferite. Attendevamo un trasporto militare che ci portasse a Wilbeforce, il centro delle operazioni militari, quando fu catturato un ribelle ferito. Lo trascinarono attraverso la strada e, a non più di trenta metri da noi... l'esecuzione. Un civile gli fracassò la testa con una sbarra di metallo, ma vedendolo ancora vivo, ancora capace di difendersi, lo finì una scarica di mitra. Vedemmo la città distrutta dai finestrini dell'autoblinda che ci portò al comando militare. Ad un certo punto, dalla torretta, incominciarono a sparare, un sussulto, l'ultimo...

Missionari della Riconciliazione

Chi ha più pagato in questa guerra insensata? Del nostro gruppo, i più schivi, i più lontani dalla vita pubblica: le quattro suore, i tre operai indiani, simbolo di tante madri, di tanti padri, di tanti giovani coinvolti in una carneficina insensata, frutto di menti alienate, del disumano diabolicamente incarnato in esseri distrutti dalla droga e dalla sete di potere.

“Mamma, mi crescerà ancora la mano quando sarò grande?” e stendeva il suo moncherino con una pietà infinita.

La speranza dell'innocenza! E non è da dire che, il suo carnefice, che l'aveva distrutta nell'anonimato del bosco, non debba passare incolume il resto della sua vita, forse neppure disturbato dalla sua coscienza ottusa, ormai, all'umano.

Spesso mi domando se siano giovani recuperabili coloro che sono stati coinvolti in tante atrocità. Mi domando se non abbiamo perso una o anche più generazioni. Il fondamento del bene e del male è stato sradicato dal fondo delle loro coscienze. Forse è stata sradicata anche la capacità umana di una rieducazione. Vivono nel vuoto, capaci ancora di tutto. Solo Dio potrà riconciliarli a sé... E noi? È entusiasmante la sua offerta, la nuova missionarietà, il potersi offrire come strumenti della sua riconciliazione, della sua misericordia e compassione.

RIFLESSIONI DI REDUCI

Riprendiamo alcune frasi da lettere di confratelli, reduci forzati dalla SL. Li riportiamo anonimi.

Ringrazio anzitutto il Signore che alla mia età mi dà ancora il coraggio, forza e desiderio di continuare il lavoro apostolico ad Gentes in Sierra Leone, dove ho passato oltre la metà della mia vita. E penso che il nostro ritorno sia un bisogno sentito da tutti i confratelli che hanno dovuto abbandonare la missione e sia una necessità per i sierraleonesi, in particolare per i nostri cristiani e catecumeni.

La gente che abbiamo lasciato di che cosa può aver bisogno? Bisognerebbe essere con loro per rispondere. E' chiaro che rimpiango di non essere con loro. Non potrei fare niente per loro eccetto il conforto di stare con loro. In regione abbiamo adottato la policy di stare con la gente e scappare con la gente. Però quando fuggivamo, noi eravamo in macchina diretti a luoghi lontani e sicuri; la maggior parte della gente, invece, poteva fuggire solo a piedi e in luoghi vicini e quindi poco sicuri. Per cui la nostra policy risultava mistificata. Quando e se torneremo là dovremo farci perdonare il privilegio di cui abbiamo goduto nei confronti dei poveri.

Date le circostanze, non potevamo rimanere. La gente in fuga, noi malmenati per odio anche alla chiesa che s'era schierata col governo legittimo.... Comunque ci consideriamo fortunati d'aver salva la vita.

Il Signore mi chiede anzitutto un periodo di riflessione.

- L'evangelizzazione non può essere solo successo ed efficienza. Il Maestro ha coronato il suo lavoro colla croce e umiliazioni. [...]

- Causa del male siamo in parte anche noi tutti. Mezzi a volte sovrabbondanti e male spesi. Accontentamenti dei nostri gusti. Paternalismo. Sfruttamento del popolo per costruire il nostro monumento. Aiuti a volte per simpatia e non ai veri bisognosi. Poco rispetto, scostanti. Debolezze nella preghiera e fedeltà ai voti. Ho

l'impressione che in genere queste considerazioni spesso siano state poco incisive, invece questa volta il Signore ci ha trovato in casa, cioè si è fatto ascoltare.

SIERRA LEONE ON THE WEB

These are the some of the best websites on Africa. They have been chosen for their usefulness on general or specific topics on Africa and their user-friendly design.

Sierra Leone Web

<http://www.sierra-leone.org/>

Current and past news stories, email directory of Sierra Leoneans, a directory of organizations concerned with Sierra Leone, Krio proverbs, Krio stories, lorry slogans, a directory of current Sierra Leone newspapers, radio and TV stations.

Africa News Online

<http://www.africanews.org/west/sierraleone/>

Up-to-the-minute news from Sierra Leone.

The International Crisis Group (ICG)

<http://www.crisisweb.org/>

Popular perceptions of Africa can be misleading, not least due to the lack of news coverage of events on the continent and a scarcity of publications and other sources of information. With this problem in mind, the International Crisis Group has compiled a directory of the best Web sites containing information on Africa.

Amnesty International

<http://www.amnesty.org/ailib/countries/indx151.htm>

Reports and news releases on human rights practices in Sierra Leone, dating back to 1996.

Human Rights Watch

<http://www.hrw.org/reports98/sierra>

HRW's report, "Sowing Terror — Atrocities Against Civilians in Sierra Leone," issued in July 1998.

Sierra Leone Country Report on Human Rights

http://www.state.gov/www/global/human_rights/1998_hrp_report/sierrale.html

The U.S. State Department's Sierra Leone Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1998. Issued 26 February 1999.

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NB - I numeri di Telefono e Fax sostituiscono quelli indicati nello Stato del Personale.

E-Mail: trattandosi di una connessione via telefono satellitare, è opportuno ridurre al minimo il volume dei dati che si spediscono. Nel caso di "attachments" comprimere i files usando il programma WinZIP.

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