

NEWS FROM SACRED HEART SEMINARY

ARCHDIOCESE OF GULU, UGANDA

Volume 1 No 13 December 2003

FROM THE DESK OF MSGR. MATTHEW ODONG – RECTOR

Dear Friends and Benefactors,
Peace and blessings to you in the Lord.

As we come to the end of this year 2003, I would like to begin by sharing with you a story; an experience of mine, which I thought, would help to give you a picture of the on-going humanitarian crisis in Northern Uganda.

Here is the story. Sometime back in 1994 an American friend of mine, a priest from the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis, visited me in Gulu. The priest asked me if it were possible to take him to the animal park where he could see some animals. Two other priests from Gulu and I agreed to travel to the animal park with the visiting priest. As we drove through the park we saw many animals: leopards, lions, monkeys, buffalo, elephant and many other animals. Near the road were two big elephants fighting. We slowed down to watch the fight. In our judgment, both elephants looked strong enough to defeat the other. One thing we observed was that the elephants' battleground, the grass, which was not involved in the fighting suffered terribly as a result of the fight. Most of the grass was destroyed. This confirmed to us the common saying that **WHEN TWO ELEPHANTS FIGHT THE GRASS SUFFERS**. It was innocently subjected to the suffering it didn't deserve.

Similarly, the eighteen-year-old conflict between the government of Uganda and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Northern Uganda has put our people into the situation of the **SUFFERING GRASS**. As I write this article, more than 850,000 people are displaced and living in refuge camps in great poverty. Nearly 20,000 children have been forcefully abducted and turned into combatants by the LRA. Most schools in the suburbs have been closed for fear of atrocities and abduction. Roads are in poor condition. Most people live below the poverty line. Thousands of human lives have been lost to the guns and land mines. Malnutrition, HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases are some of the results of the bloody Northern conflict.

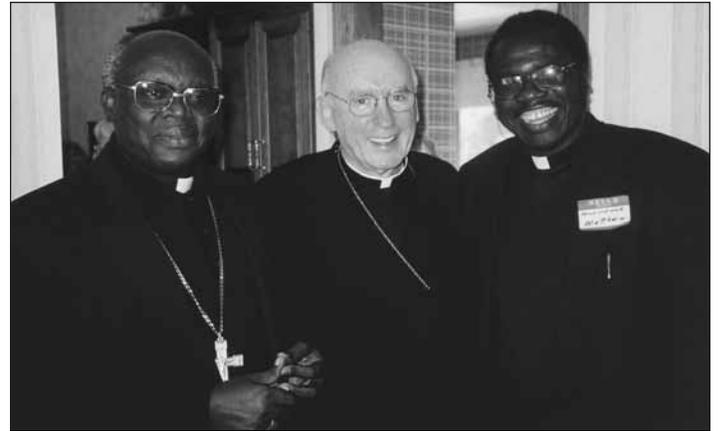
On May 11, 2003 Sacred Heart Seminary was attacked by the LRA. The rebels abducted a total of 41 seminarians. The young seminarians were tied together with rope in groups of four and made to carry the looted properties like slaves. To date only 21 of them have escaped from captivity. The remaining 20 are not accounted for. God alone knows whether they are still alive or dead. About two weeks ago, the wife of my uncle (Mrs. Angelina Alex Lagoro) was one of the seven victims killed with guns in a car ambush by the rebels. She left behind 6 children. May God rest her soul in eternal peace.

Early this week, the United Nations Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs, Mr. Jan Egeland visited one of the displaced camps in Kitgum. At the end of his visit, he made a statement: "I am shocked by the sheer size of this crisis and the suffering of its victims... This is appalling... Northern Uganda must be one of the worst humanitarian crisis in the world."

CALL FOR SOLIDARITY WITH NORTHERN UGANDA

In 2001, the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops came out with a document inviting the people of the United States to open their doors to the challenges, difficulties, aspirations and problems facing the African continent today. This document was inspired by the words of Jesus Christ: "**whatever you do to the least of my brothers and sisters that you have done to me... When I was hungry, imprisoned, persecuted you came to my aid (Mt. 25: 36-40). As members of the Body of Christ, when one member is in pain the whole Body suffers.**"

In the case of Northern Uganda, the need for solidarity is urgent to save human lives and restore the dignity of the people being threatened everyday by the 18-year conflict between the government of Uganda and the Lord's Resistance Army in which the Sudan



Archbishop John Odama, Archbishop Harry Flynn and Monsignor Matthew during Odama's brief visit to the Twin Cities.

government is involved. We are about to reach the state of genocide like that which happened in Rwanda in 1994. We appeal for the intervention by the International Community especially the United States, the UN and others.

WHAT YOU CAN DO FOR THE PEOPLE OF NORTHERN UGANDA

- **Prayer:** You can pray for the conversion of the hearts and minds of the conflicting parties to stop the military option as a means to settle their differences.
- **Advocacy:** Create awareness to the International Community about the suffering of the people in Northern Uganda and request their immediate intervention in ending the conflict.
- **Talk to your Government:** To put pressure on the Ugandan government, the Lord's Resistance Army and the government of Sudan to pursue dialog as opposed to military means in bringing peace to Northern Uganda.
- **Humanitarian assistance:** The on-going conflict has created a high level of poverty to the people in Northern Uganda. Most people live below the poverty line. Supplies of food, medicine, shelter, clean drinking water, educational opportunities, care for the HIV/AIDS victims and orphans are very much needed. Education is a powerful means of fighting ignorance and poverty. In our Archdiocese of Gulu, it is painful to see in one district of Pader hundreds of young girls and boys who cannot continue with their education because of financial constraints and lack of a good school in the area. We plan to build a school to give opportunity to these young people who feel abandoned so that they can develop their talents and become useful citizens for the transformation of the society. Archbishop Harry J. Flynn of St. Paul and Minneapolis accepted our proposal that the school be named after him: **ARCHBISHOP FLYNN COMPREHENSIVE SECONDARY SCHOOL**. We invite your solidarity with us in the realization of this project for our youth. It is only with your support that we can succeed in reaching out to the most vulnerable and marginalized people of Northern Uganda.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND APPRECIATION

On behalf of Sacred Heart Seminary and the Archdiocese of Gulu, I wish to acknowledge with gratitude your solidarity with us in our struggles, challenges and needs.

Your donations enabled us to realize the following needs:

- Construction of a brick wall around Sacred Heart Seminary to provide security to the staff and remaining seminarians.

- Purchase of food for our seminarians and some victims of war.
- Mass offerings and subsidies to our priests in the parishes.
- Drilled wells to provide clean drinking water for students and displaced people at St. Mary's College Lacor (Mary's well), Christ the King PTC and Adilang Village. Effort to drill a well at Wi-polo/Paimol failed because it was rocky.
- Financial support to many seminarians and orphans in difficulties.
- Financial support to St. Teresa's Girls School in Kalongo and Giulio Pastore in Kitgum.
- Transportation (four door pick-up) for Pajule Parish.
- Purchased 300 chairs and 10 tables for Sacred Heart Seminary.
- Renovation work on the Seminary's buildings.
- Medical care for our seminarians.
- Financial support for projects in Atanga, Padibe and Christ the King parishes.
- Financial support to facilitate the office of the Vocations Director of Gulu Archdiocese.
- Transport facilitation to office of Justice and Peace, Archdiocese of Gulu.

Our love and prayers go out to you. May the good Lord bless and reward your generosity. I wish you a fruitful Advent, Merry Christmas and Happy New Year of peace and joy in the Lord.



Msgr. Matthew Odong
Rector

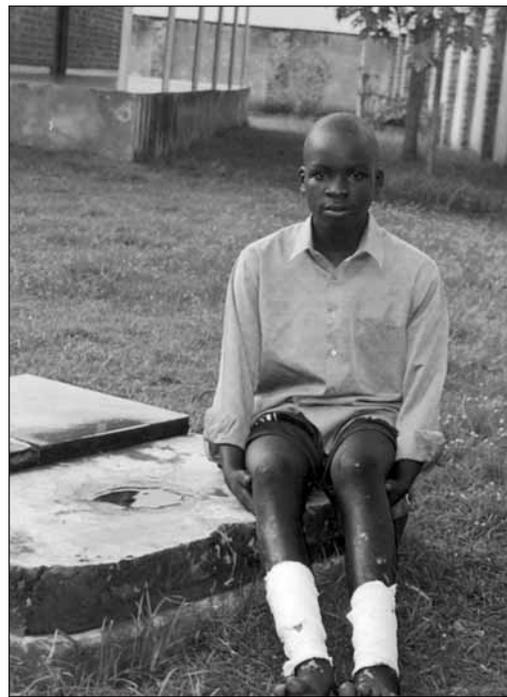
THREE WEEKS IN THE BUSH AS AN ABDUCTEE

By Seminarian William Akena

It was on Sunday morning, May 11, 2003 shortly after midnight that the rebels of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) stormed Sacred Heart Seminary and abducted 41 of us. This particular incident was not anticipated. However, one could sense something peculiar that evening, judging from the unusual increase in the number of people who normally take refuge in the seminary at night.

I first heard gunshots from the north of the seminary. Immediately there was total confusion, fear and panic. In no time we realized that they were already around our dormitory. They used axes to break through the doors and windows. Attempts to hide ourselves and some of our valuables under the beds became hopeless as they managed to break through and enter. In fear and trembling we prayed to God for intervention. Those involved in the operation within the dormitory were very cruel boys between the ages of 9 and 18. Soon we were all ordered out from our hiding places, lined up and tied with ropes at the waist. I was the second last person to be tied to a group of seven. With our belongings on our heads, we were marched out of the seminary to the football field. Here was supposed to be the first place for re-organization before beginning the real journey to an unknown destination. We were all ordered to squat down, then at a signal a good number of rebels joined us, appearing from all the areas surrounding the seminary's football field where they had taken cover earlier. As we were pondering the next move, one of the rebel soldiers, brandishing an axe, ordered me to lead him back inside the seminary to show him the girl's dormitory. To my response that girls do not study in the seminary, he threatened to cut me to pieces. However, I was relieved when we saw a group of girls in line being herded straight to where we were. Unfortunately these were some of the school pupils who usually take refuge in the seminary for fear of this very kind of abduction.

When we had all settled down, they checked all the belongings and sorted out all the valuable ones to be carried along. Books and other undesired items were left to litter the football field. We set off carrying our assorted items. As we went along they continued to collect whatever they needed from the homesteads we passed. Most of the looted commodities included goats, chickens, smoked meat and UN-WFP relief beans and yellow maize flour. In some homesteads we would find some abandoned elderly people whom they could deprive of their meager belongings as they looked on helplessly. At least, thank God their lives were spared. All night long they moved with us for a very long distance and always in a zigzag fashion so as to confuse us and distort our sense of direction. Their reason was to avoid the possibility of escape and tracing our way back. Though



Seminarian William Akena safely back at the seminary continuing his studies.

very exhausted from the long journey and carrying the heavy loads on our heads, the journey continued.

In the morning of Sunday, May 11th, I realized we were headed toward the north of Gulu. As we proceeded on our trek, we would meet other groups of rebels and abductees who would join our group. A helicopter gunship approached our location that day. We were ordered to hide under some thick bushes, lying face down until it disappeared. By evening of that Sunday, we arrived at the main camp where we met their overall commander, Onen Kamdulu. Here we met many people ranging from children to adults. The place was a well-organized barracks, it even had standard tents. With our swollen legs we were very tired, thirsty, hungry and sleepy. For introduction, we were lined up in a semi-circle facing the commander who appeared calm and fearless. He greeted us as a matter of intimidation rudely inquired if we had ever seen people being killed. When we answered in the negative, he remarked that we were lucky because had any of us attempted to escape, we would have experienced what he was talking about. Each one of us gave his name, age, home village and hobbies at the seminary. Next we were divided according to classes i.e. S.1-S.4. The very young ones among us were assigned to be escorts to the commanders while the elder ones were mixed up and distributed to the various groups, which consisted of about seven seminarians each.

There were three main LRA combatant groups: A-coy, B-coy and C-coy to which we were assigned. In each coy, there was supposed to be a S.4 seminarian, which was the top class. His responsibility included prescription of drugs, reading, writing and interpretation of information. I happened to belong to this category and was assigned to B-coy. The first meal that Sunday evening consisted of an earlier slaughtered goat, which I carried along that morning. I ended up with only a little soup because so many people were sharing such a small quantity of food. For the rebels I could prescribe some available stock of pain relief tablets but the abductees were to be content with some leaves and stems heated over fire and applied to the swollen legs. The abductees arms were tied behind the back and then joined to that of another person so that the two would sleep while lying back to back covered with polythene bags for a blanket. Once in this position, there was no way of going elsewhere to urinate. On Monday morning our arms were untied and somehow we felt some relief, though the loads to carry were still intact. Together with the commander (referred to as the Big Man) we set off on a trek toward another unknown destination. We walked all day crossing rivers and through thick bushes which cut our bodies badly as we moved wearily on. By afternoon we reached a point where we had to rest, cook, eat and then carry on. From my group, B-coy, I could still see all

the other seminarians in their respective groups since we had not been separated completely. No sooner had we settled, than we received information that the UPDF (government soldiers) were very near. That prompted us to flee. An outstanding command was neither to get close to the other, step on the grass noisily or worst of all move slowly. My trouble started after about one kilometer when the group had to separate to avoid detection by the government forces. I could not move fast enough due to my deteriorating condition, especially my swollen legs. One rebel soldier was charged with the task of urging me on or to kill me if I failed to make it after the rest of the group, which had already gone far ahead and could no longer be seen. He continuously subjected me to whips, blows, kicks and even hitting me with his RPG launcher. I fell down twice, each time receiving serious torture despite continuous pleas for mercy. I was very weak, thirsty, hungry after falling for the third time. I pleaded with him to release me or kill me if he so wished. Two of his companions joined him as he was hitting me with a cane on the head, neck and back. I fell down unconscious, though I could still faintly hear one of them advising him to hit and crack my skull so that brain could ooze out. Fortunately, however, his other companion suggested that he should just tie my hands behind and leave me since I was already as good as dead. He took the last advice and tied my arms behind me. Before abandoning me he gave a final blow causing unconsciousness. About 7:00pm when I regained consciousness, I found that it had rained very heavily and my hands were still tied behind my back. While the heavy rain might have helped me regain consciousness I attributed it to a miracle from God. I was very thirsty, hungry and unable to walk because of my swollen legs coupled with the torture experienced earlier on. The place, being sort of a stream, provided me with water, which I got from the holes I dug in the soil using my fingers. I had to spend the next three days at this spot, lying under a thicket and would only come out for water. It rained on me there for two consecutive nights and as much as I tried, I could not move any distance from that spot because of the pain in my swollen legs. On the fourth day, I could drag myself slowly with the support of two walking sticks heading toward Ladwong Hill. After 30 minutes, I almost came on a group of rebels that was passing by, had it not been for the tall grass that hid me from them. After they had gone, I tried to trace the path they had come through, but in the process I got lost and more confused. I completed the first week in the bush neither eating any food nor coming across homesteads or people.

Once during the second week, I again narrowly escaped being caught by a group of rebel soldiers, as they were about to cross the stream I was moving along. I jumped and hid just some five meters from where they were passing. Thanks be to God. The sun was giving me direction during this second week, which I spent meandering around different hills. There was rain almost every night. I would walk from morning to late evening with some break in between to rest from the hot afternoon sun. My survival depended purely on water. No food whatever. God always protected me from the wild animals. On occasions, I would come across some snakes, but none harmed me. I did pray a lot and that gave me courage. My greatest worry was about the wounds in my legs, which were getting worse. On the 2nd of June I discovered a junction leading to an abandoned homestead that had many mango trees with plenty of ripe fruit. That became my first meal after depending solely on water for three weeks. I ate and got so satisfied that I fell asleep under one of the trees. When I woke up, I realized that a group of rebels were also enjoying the fruits nearby. I had to conceal myself till I was sure they had left. I once more set off following the road. Before long, I glanced behind me and saw an old man riding a bicycle towards my direction. On noticing me he became frightened as he thought he had entered a rebel ambush. However, he proceeded closer to me. On seeing my pitiful condition, he became very sympathetic and spoke very kindly with me. He offered me a lift on his bicycle and we headed for his home, which happened to be in Ajulu Displaced People's Camp. On the way we came across a cassava field from which he uprooted some tubers and gave me to eat. Indeed it was a welcome addition to the diet of mangoes and water.

For the first time after my ordeal, I came in contact with many people in the camp. I breathed a sigh of relief, as I knew for sure that

at last I was bound for my dear home. At the residence of my rescuer I had a bath and thereafter enjoyed the first real meal of porridge, beans and posho (maize flour bread) after such a long time of near death from starvation. A soldier and my host reported my presence to the Army Commander of Ajulu Detach where later I was escorted. There I was given a warm welcome and fairly good treatment. On receiving information about my return, the commander in charge of Gulu main barracks sent a pick-up truck to bring me to Gulu the following day. It was on the 3rd of June, the feast day of the Ugandan Martyrs, that I finally found myself in Gulu Barracks. When my mother was informed she came immediately and on seeing me she ran like a mad person to welcome me. It was a great moment of real excitement for all who had given me up for dead. Fr. Robert Obol, on behalf of the Rector, Msgr. Matthew Odong came from the seminary and took me from the Army Hospital and transferred me to Lacor Hospital. The Rector and other staff of the seminary had gone to Namugongo to celebrate the Uganda Martyrs Day.

I attribute my rescue to the loving God who protected and saved me for a special purpose in this life. My gratitude to Archbishop Odama, Msgr. Matthew Odong, all the staff and seminarians at Sacred Heart Seminary, my mother, relatives and friends, benefactors and all those who prayed for my release from captivity. I continue to seek your prayers for my vocation to the priesthood and for an end to this bloody war in Northern Uganda.

To God and to you I owe a thousand thanks.

SOLIDARITY WITH AFRICA THE NOTRE DAME CONFERENCE SEPTEMBER 21-24, 2003

*By Father David Schwinghamer, M.M.
Maryknoll Missionary*

BACKGROUND

The U. S. Catholic Church is slowly but steadily building links of solidarity with the peoples of Africa. A major step in this important missionary undertaking took place recently at the University Notre Dame when over 200 African and American church people came together to reflect and dialog on Africa's promise, needs and image.

This conference was a second step in the U. S. Catholic Church's Millennium program of attempting to live the gospel more faithfully in the globalized world of the 21st century. The first step took place on November 21, 2001 when the Catholic Bishops of the U. S. published their statement called *A Call to Solidarity with Africa*. The Notre Dame conference was a response to this important document. The purpose of the four-day conference was to plan ways of giving life to the bishops' letter.

CONFERENCE FORMAT AND GOALS

The organizers of the Notre Dame conference set out four goals:

- To raise the profile of Africa on American campuses and in the American Church.
- To increase understanding of Africa's contemporary promise and challenges.



Pete, Fr. Mike Perry (USCCB), Archbishop Odama, Dan, Msgr. Matthew meeting at Notre Dame during Africa Conference.

100% of all funds received go directly to Monsignor Matthew for the work of the Church in the Archdiocese of Gulu. All of the costs of mailing, printing of the newsletter, accounting, office expenses, non-profit reporting to Federal and State agencies and travel expenses to Africa and Washington, DC are paid by the Vaughan and Truax families.

- To develop proposals to answer those challenges in solidarity with the church in Africa.
- To harness energy to follow through on those proposals.

To reach these ambitious goals, the conference organizers, which included the Institute for Church Life and other departments of UND, the USCCB and the Bishops Council of Nigeria relied on a heavily academic format of formal presentations followed by short periods of questions from the floor.

The conference opened with an important reflection on the document *A Call to Solidarity with Africa* by Bishop John Ricard, chairman of the International Policy Committee of the USCCB. Then, President Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria gave a major public address on the challenges facing Africa. His talk was well attended especially by many young Notre Dame students.

The following day centered on the need to re-image Africa. African and African-American scholars, priests and sisters gave several interesting scriptural, theological and historical presentations on the deeper meaning of solidarity. In the afternoon and evening three African bishops (Monsengwo – DRC (Democratic Republic of Congo), Onaiyekan – Nigeria and Odama – Uganda) highlighted the courageous responses being made by the Church in Africa, to the challenges of violence and war.

The third day focused on numerous and somewhat disparate aspects of the contemporary reality of Africa, such as NEPAD (New Economic Partnership for African Development), AIDS/HIV treatment programs, the implications of the coming oil boom in west Africa, international finance and trade and the future of U. S. foreign policy and Africa's new agenda.

On the final day, a dozen Nigerian religious personnel living and working in the U. S. Church made presentations on the theme of *Africa's Gift to the Church in the United States*. Their stories of integration and missionary service in the United States and in other countries of the world, often made with Power Point software, made it clear to most participants that parts of the African Church have come of age as missionaries.

The conference concluded with discussion about the next step of the process – a conference to be held in Nigeria.

SOME HIGHLIGHTS

While the conference was heavy on input (over 40 presentations), there were some presentations that I found particularly interesting:

- *Solidarity Among Christians: Lessons from the New Testament* – Sr. Teresa Okure, SHJC: on the difference between solidarity “with” and solidarity “among” people.
- *The Church on the Frontlines of War and Peace* – Prof. Carolyn Nordstrom: on examples of how people in conflict reconstitute their lives often with the help of the only institution left standing after a war – the Church.
- *The Church at the Service of Humanity* – Archbishop Laurent Monsengwo: on the critical reconciling role played by the institutions of the Church in the DRC.
- *Religious Roots of Conflict: the Case of the Sudan* – Mr. Francis Deng: on how two very different identities – Northern Arab and Southern African – developed in the Sudan.
- *NEPAD: New Covenant for Renewal on the Continent?* Bishop Kevin Dowling (South Africa): on the problems and prospects for this ambitious continental development program.
- *Implications of President Bush's \$15 Billion HIV/AIDS Initiative on Foreign Aid* – Stephen Morrison: on the politics of President Bush's outreach to Africa.

CONCLUSIONS

Several conference participants noted that this gathering on Africa was dominated by representatives of one country – Nigeria. Indeed, there were few participants from other African countries. It seems the conference was not widely publicized. Few parish-based organizations in the U. S. were represented.

The heavily academic format provided a lot of information on important issues affecting Africa, but there were few chances for small group interaction among the participants – a key requirement for the building of solidarity.

The first-hand witness to the African Church's involvement in peacemaking in Uganda and the DRC was very inspiring. The hard-

headed political analysis of US foreign policy towards Africa was sobering. The possibilities for advocacy on behalf of Africa in the present Congress were daunting.

A major challenge that emerged from the conference is how to keep the process of building solidarity with Africa moving ahead. A key question to be addressed is what institutions – both in Africa and in the U. S. Church – have the capacity and experience to promote the kind of solidarity called for by the Bishops' statement?

PEACE EFFORT IN WASHINGTON, DC

By Pete Truax

Following the four day African Conference at Notre Dame Archbishop Odama, Monsignor Matthew, Dan Vaughan and I flew to Washington for two days of high level meetings with U. S. Government officials arranged by Father Michael Perry, African Policy Advisor to the U. S. Bishops. Archbishop Odama and Monsignor Matthew had the opportunity to tell their story to people at the National Security Council (White House), State Department and members of Congress. We were pleasantly surprised to learn that an agreement was signed on September 25th between the warring parties in the civil war within Sudan. We were even more surprised to learn that the State Department, through USAID (U. S. Agency for International Development) is taking the initiative to bring together the Ugandan Government and the LRA (Lord's Resistance Army) to negotiate a settlement to end the conflict in Northern Uganda. Len Rogers (USAID) and Bruce Ehrnman (State) will be directly involved in the negotiations. We were told that they would be offering incentives to both parties to end the conflict. We were also told that while the incentives would be offered with one hand, a big stick would be held in the other hand. It appears they are very serious about ending the war that has caused so much suffering to the people of Northern Uganda. We left Washington with a great sense of hope. We are very grateful to Fr. Mike Perry (USCCB) and Dan Griffin with Catholic Relief Services (CRS) for the time and effort they put into arranging our itinerary and moving us around Washington. Lets pray that this initiative by USAID will bear fruit soon.



Pete, Bruce Ehrnman (State Dept.), Len Rogers, Archbishop Odama, Dan, Msgr. Matthew at USAID offices in Washington.



Dan, Msgr. Matthew, Pete, Jendayi Frazer (National Security Council), Dan Griffin (CRS), Archbishop Odama, Fr. Mike Perry (USCCB) at White House.