



This is the testimony of Bernadette, a survivor of the Rwandan genocide

My father was killed during the genocide in 1994. My mother survived but she is handicapped. She lives with shrapnel in her body because of a hand grenade attack a few weeks prior to genocide. We were 9 children in our family, but my elder brother was also killed in the genocide. We are now 8 children and our handicapped mother.

On April 6th, the killings began. My father lived in another city where he was working. We presume he was killed there, as we were to never hear from him again. My elder brother who had gone to visit Granny was killed with all the relatives there; none of them survived.

Mother was brave and encouraged us. She told us never to tell anyone that we were Tutsi, but to tell people we were Hutu. We went to a new place, where people did not know us. She said we should tell people that our father was an officer in the army!

On June 5, at around 3pm, the *interahamwe* militia attacked us. I was out of the house, but when I came back I saw a lot of *interahamwe* standing at our door. I immediately ran for it, but they chased after me and seized me. I was taken inside the house. They told mother that they wanted all the girls in the house. I was then taken out, and was summoned to follow them. I refused. They bit me. They then ordered me to lie down so that they could kill me, instead they raped me in front of my family.

One of the rapists said he would protect my family and I. He took my sister and me to his house promising he would bring the rest of the family there later. There were other girls who, he made me believe, were his sisters. In the evening when he came back from killing duties, he raped one of the girls. He then said: "Now you are all my wives". I was only 13 years old. I said "No I am not". He said: "If you refuse, many *interahamwe* will come and rape you. And when they are finished, I will shoot you." So then he raped me all night long. We escaped in the morning, when our captor left for his job, of killing.



But things got worse. After the genocide, I realised my health was not good. I started to develop a lot of infections. I was paralysed and also suffered from tuberculosis. It was then that I was told I had contracted HIV virus. I felt that the earth was crashing in on me. I stayed in hospital from November 11th to December 4th, 2002. Though I was encouraged by the medical staff, I felt lost and completely desperate. I was advised to appeal for assistance to be able to receive antiretroviral treatment.

My aunt, a widow who is a member of a church organisation, told me that there was an organisation that helped people who have the same problems as me. So I went there. I was received warmly, and I was given an opportunity to tell things I had never dared to say. Because of this I felt somehow released. I realise that the deep sorrow that I felt in my heart began to loosen. Before, when I started to think about my situation, I looked like a mad person. But now, I feel free to talk about myself and feel very confident and I realise that the wounds are being healed. That is why I think I must start again studying.

I thank God for the people at this organisation, they have very important work to do and I ask God to enable them to do even more.

Today's Reading of the Testimonies marks the 15th Anniversary of the Rwandan genocide, in support of survivors like Bernadette.