

**Born in the Borderlands, Living for Unity:
The Story of a Peacebuilder in Northern Uganda**

**A Narrative of the Life and Work of
Sister Pauline Silver Acayo**

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Acronyms

ARLPI	Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative
CRS	Catholic Relief Services
DDMC	District Disaster Management Committee
DRPT	District Resettlement Peace Team
FAC	Formerly Abducted Children
FAP	Formerly Abducted Persons
GUSCO	Gulu Support the Children Organization
ICC	International Criminal Court
IDP	Internally Displaced Peoples
JPC	Justice and Peace Commission
LDU	Local Defense Unit
LRA	Lord's Resistance Army
NGO	Nongovernmental Organization
NRA	National Resistance Army
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
NRM	National Resistance Movement
NUPI	Northern Uganda Peace Initiative
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN)
PVP	People's Voice for Peace
PWG	Protection Working Group
TPDF	Tanzanian People's Defense Forces
UNLA	Ugandan National Liberation Army

UPDA	Uganda People's Democratic Army
UPDF	Uganda People's Defense Forces
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

“Nothing Happens for Nothing”

They wanted to visit their grandmother, just down the road from their home, about three kilometers away. Pauline was fourteen years old; her brother, Caesar, eighteen. It was already evening, so it took some convincing of their mother to let them go. Of course, they were old enough to make the short walk if it got dark, but there was news that Idi Amin’s soldiers¹ were defeated in the capital, Kampala, and were now fleeing to the north, to Sudan. Pauline’s home lies on the main road that divides her village, Minakulu, and continues north to Juba, Sudan.

“Are you sleeping there or are you coming back?” their mother asked.

“We’ll sleep there.”

So they crossed the road. The road is straight, except for a gradual curve near their home. It is difficult to spot visitors until they are near the house. The land is fertile in that part of Gulu, a district in northern Uganda, so the grass stretches tall. It was a quiet evening as they made their way, crossing the road just north of the curve—a turn that masked the sound of the army vehicle. The grass was high, but Pauline caught a glimpse of a gun, just as the gunner caught sight of her and Caesar. Amin’s soldiers were seated on the top of the vehicle, guns in hand. The shots cracked the evening silence and the siblings ran apart, falling instinctively in the grass to conceal themselves. They lay still and held their breath for as long as they could, not wanting to disturb even a blade of grass. She heard one soldier yell, “We have killed them already.”

Amin’s men drove off, the rumble of the army vehicle now unmistakable.

Pauline and Caesar waited a few minutes, then slowly raised themselves out of the grass and ran to their grandmother’s home. The next morning, Pauline, Caesar, their brother Donasiano (who was already at their grandmother’s home), and their grandmother arose to the

¹ Idi Amin’s brutal dictatorship lasted from 1971-1979, when he was overthrown by the Tanzanian People’s Defense Forces (TPDF) and Ugandan guerillas.

sounds of Amin's soldiers in the village, rustling through the mango trees looking for food. Their neighbors in the village spotted the soldiers, and believing them unarmed, tried to chase them out of the village. Pauline's family fled east, away from the fighting, as the sounds of screams and gunshots trailed after them. They made it further into the village, where they hid among several houses in the center of the community. The soldiers never made it that far into the village; Pauline and her family stayed hidden for the night.

On the third day after this encounter, Pauline and Caesar were able to return home safely. It was a Saturday; they accompanied their mother to Mass the next day to offer thanks for the protection they received. Neither was killed; neither was injured; they made it back home. In a time when indiscriminate murdering, torturing, and looting were the norm²—and at a moment when angry, defeated soldiers were being chased out of their country—it was inconceivable Pauline and her brother should still be alive. “That was God's protection. God had a project for me. Otherwise I would have gone at that time. Nothing happens for nothing.”³

The Baby in the Family--Love, Protection, Determination

Though born in the borderlands between the districts of Gulu and Lira in northern Uganda, between the lands of the Acholi people and the lands of the Langi people, Pauline Silver Acayo has always known her place. Born June 3, 1965, it was not until twelve days later that she was baptized in the Catholic faith and given her name after Saint Paul. She was the youngest of her five siblings (four full siblings and a half-sister), and therefore, the one doted on constantly. Embracing the love given to her by the family, she was also eager to assert herself. When other

² Amin's reign was a particularly brutal time in Ugandan history. It is estimated that between 300,000 and 500,000 people were killed during his military dictatorship.

³ Quotations not cited in the text are taken from interviews with Sister Pauline Silver Acayo between September 29 and November 18, 2005.

children of her age were learning to cook, Pauline realized she was overly protected, constantly spoiled. She forced her mother to teach her to cook and do the activities she watched other women doing. “They loved me, but they didn’t want me to do anything.” However, it was not only traditional women’s work that Pauline wanted to know; she did the chores of the boys as well. She was responsible for cleaning the compound⁴ and other typically male household activities.

She not only worked hard, she played hard. Closest in age are her brother, Caesar, born in 1961, and her half-sister, Alice, the same age as Caesar. The three were inseparable as children: playing netball and seven stones,⁵ hunting birds in the bush using slingshots, and going to fetch water and staying out until sundown, not to the amusement of their mother. “We used to play in the evenings under the moonlight. We could move freely and we felt really secure, even if our parents were not at home.”

Pauline remembers a childhood of peace in the north, of love in her family, and of fellowship in her village of Minakulu: “We were a very social family. When food was cooked, we didn’t cook only for the people in our house, we shared with everybody around. People would come and relax at our home. We could sit and listen to stories people would tell.” Her father, Ogwal Martin, was in the army⁶ and always on the move with the troops. When he was home, he told stories about World War II, when he served in the British army.⁷ Martin portrayed the war as a civilized, gentlemanly conflict. His unit would often travel to Tanzania, and one day

⁴ In Uganda, a compound refers to one’s house, as well as the area surrounding it. It is sometimes walled in or noticeably marked off.

⁵ Seven stones is a children’s game and Pauline’s favorite game as a child. It is described in detail later in the story.

⁶ Her father was in the Ugandan army during Milton Obote’s first time in office. Obote was the first Prime Minister of Uganda from 1960-1966, then took complete control of the country by ousting the President, Edward Mutesa II. He remained President until 1971 when he was overthrown by Amin. His second time in office was from 1980-1985.

⁷ Uganda was a British colony from the late 1800s until it gained independence in 1962. Ugandans served in World War II on behalf of the British Empire.

they were driving and decided to stop and rest under a shade tree. The enemy had found the tree a suitable one for shade as well, and when they saw Martin's unit approaching, they hid in its limbs. Instead of ambushing Martin and the soldiers, the opposing forces waited for them to finish their rest; when Martin and the others realized the enemy was in the tree above them, they too did not panic, but rested and then left to prepare for battle. The children were confused as he told the story, but her father stated simply, "When you are fighting a war and it is time to rest, nobody is supposed to shoot. You can sit with your enemies like this and converse, but once it is time to begin again, then you fight."

Pauline was so beloved that she was able to attend a high-quality primary school. Her brothers and sisters had attended a local school, but by the time Pauline entered school, the local school had developed a bad reputation, with apathetic teachers and poor textbooks with outdated material. The young Pauline had the opportunity to attend a more reputable school, much further from home. Her siblings were never bitter because of her opportunity, and it was a decision made among the whole family. Never one to take opportunities for granted, even at the tender age of six, Pauline was resolved to do well: "I was so determined—even in primary school—keeping in mind that I was taken to this good school and must pass with very high passing marks to please my mother and father and those who were paying for me. And I wanted to have a bright future." She was often the only girl among classrooms of boys. Her determination took her to the top of the class, even the district; her success was recognized and her O level education⁸ was paid for by the government, one of only ten students to be given a scholarship. Her success was also recognized by her family, who continued to dote on her. Her parents would buy anything she wanted for school: clothes, shoes, books, a new bicycle. The family even held a great celebration

⁸ O level, or Ordinary level (sometimes referred to as S-1 through S-4) corresponds to three years of high school in the United States.

for her when she passed primary school, with the whole village there to celebrate her accomplishments. While seated in the middle of the merriment as the guest of honor, her friends performed songs and dances. They indulged themselves on good food and drink until the sun set. Even then, even with the love of her friends and family so evident, Pauline was thinking of a larger community.

A Natural and Nurtured Faith

“When I was growing up, I had a very, very strong faith, but without knowing it.” Pauline was raised in a strong Catholic family. Her mother, Jacinta Anyeko, at one time aspired to be a nun. Instead, she and Martin, who was also Catholic, reared their children in the Christian faith. “On Sundays, if you didn’t go for prayers, you didn’t eat.” Some of her earliest memories are of all the children trying to learn the narratives of the faith their parents practiced: of her sister, Happy, reading Bible stories to her siblings; of imitating the celebration of the Mass, with one child acting as the priest and the rest as the congregation; of dramatizing the scenes of David and Goliath, the Israelites’ journey to Canaan, or the work of the apostles. “I think these are the things that built my faith.”

Evenings were always the time of day for education in the faith and for prayers. After a supper of stew and rice, the girls would crowd around their mother, while the boys surrounded their father. On a night in 1969, Pauline would hear the story of the Uganda Martyrs⁹ and about the spread of Christianity in Uganda. The Martyrs became saints in 1964, but their feast day was

⁹ The Uganda Martyrs are credited as the first Christian converts in Uganda. Christian missionaries first entered Uganda in the late 1870s, when Uganda was divided into kingdoms. In the south beginning in 1884, the Buganda kingdom was ruled by King Mwanga II, who persecuted the converts for what he viewed as their lack of allegiance to Buganda and its customs. Between 1885 and 1887, twenty-two Catholic converts and twenty-three Protestant converts were killed because of their beliefs. See “The Uganda Martyrs,” Mission Office of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, available at <http://www.missionsla.org/subpages/learn/archivesaint/marchsaint.html>

recognized in 1969, and declared to be the third of June: Pauline's birthday. It is also on these nights after supper that she would hear the words that mysteriously resonated with her, even as a young girl. The teachings "entered her heart." There were seemingly simple words, like, "Be peaceful with others. Be peaceful in yourself." But there were also complex ideas: "If ever someone does wrong to you, never, never, pay it back with wrong. Always pay someone who has done wrong to you with good." These words took root in her life, not only because she felt them to be true, but because her mother seemed to live by them as well. A powerful example for Pauline was when Mary, the mother of Alice, Pauline's half-sister, made an attempt on Jacinta's life; Jacinta refused to take revenge. She didn't "pay tit-for-tat," but instead forgave Mary; in the process, Jacinta's actions became a palpable example of grace for Pauline and her siblings. "Even now my mother is still so strong at prayers. You see her encouraging the grandchildren who are now staying with her. She is teaching them the same way she taught us."

It was her mother who would teach prayer and then live by the example found in the "Our Father." She taught them in English and in Luo, the native tongue of that area of Uganda:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be your name,
Your kingdom come, your will be done
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
And forgive us our trespasses
As we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil. Amen.

Wonwa ma tye I polo, nyingi giwor, ker meri obin
Miti ma gitimo ilobo, kit ma gitimo wi polo
Mi wa tin camwa majwi, wekbanya wa
Kit ma waweko kilobanyawa
Pe iwek gibitwa
Ento larwa ki igin marac. Amen.

Pauline also saw the examples of Sisters who came to her parish in Gulu. “It attracted me so much: the way they behaved and handled people, the way they dressed, the way they prayed, and especially the way they loved people. I always wanted to behave like that.” Aspiring to behave like these Sisters she witnessed, Pauline joined a youth movement called the Crusaders. She tried to join the group as a child of seven, but the leadership refused; she tried again at eight years old, and again at nine years old. When she was tall enough, and strong enough to endure long walks to villages deep in the bush, they allowed her into the group—and made her a leader. Along with her brothers Victor, Caesar, and Alice, Pauline led the group in weekly activities. They faced other parishes in biblical knowledge competitions; they held each other accountable for virtues they promised to practice; and they learned and taught about Mass and prayers as one group. Apart from these inward, rather personal practices, they would extend their devotion to the community by visiting villages deep in the bush and helping those neglected in society. The children would collect money from their own villages to buy goods to take to the people, or they would collect food for them. When they reached the villages, they would do household chores for those not able to on their own, fetching water, sweeping rooms and compounds, and collecting firewood. “And we loved them.”

Pauline loved her family and was grateful for the peaceful life she was taught; but, she was eager to join the convent. “I wanted to join when I was very, very young, but they kept on refusing. I have the heart of caring for others, so I don’t take only my family members to be in my family. I always want to take care of everybody.”

Messages

The walls of the convent are built thick, made of concrete, and built high, taller than any man. The iron gates are bolted, and the doors to the buildings are of a strong metal, constructed to protect the people inside—and the faith they practice. By late 1985, Pauline was in the novitiate; she had another year and a half of training to become a Sister. She was sleeping in the wing of the convent that houses those in the novitiate. It was a starless night and because the wind was somewhat strong, the women couldn't hear the crumbling of the concrete as the rebels drilled, by hand, through the wall.¹⁰

After boring a hole in the wall, one of the rebels who was thin and small in stature wriggled through the hole and entered the compound to open the door for the others. Someone spotted him and signaled for the rest of the women to escape. They ran quickly and quietly to the last place of refuge—the chapel, in the center of the compound—and began praying. There were forty-one bedrooms, plus the storage rooms and visitor's rooms: fifty-seven rooms in all. They recited prayers as each room was searched: "*Wonwa ma tye I polo . . .*" When they were unable to find a single person in the rest of the compound, the rebels assumed they were taking refuge in the chapel. Initially, the rebels were hesitant to enter the chapel; they understood the taboo of harming people who take sanctuary in a church. They fired shots around and over the chapel, but not directly into it, intending to frighten them out. The women just kept praying: "*Ento larwa ki igin marac. Amen.*"

Frustrated with their own rather considerate tactics, the rebels stormed the chapel and forced the women outside, slapping them hard across their faces and insulting their faith if they

¹⁰ These "rebels" are unidentified. There are numerous possibilities: they may have been remnants of the Ugandan National Liberation Army (UNLA), led by Tito Okello. The UNLA overthrew Obote in 1985, and was in turn overthrown by Yoweri Museveni and his National Resistance Army (NRA) in January of 1986. The "rebels" may also have been early followers of Alice Lakwena and her Holy Spirit Movement, the Acholi group that preceded the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA).

hesitated. The women were lined up and then wrestled to the dirt so they could not rise to escape. The men then chose twenty of the thirty-six women—Pauline was one of the twenty. No one was sure of the rebels' intentions or what would happen to the women: the abductions, lootings, and killings that would become common occurrences later in the north were still unprecedented in 1985. When they ordered the twenty into the storeroom, the women obliged. Loading up the looted goods, including sewing machines and sacks of salt on the women's heads, they then followed the rebels into the bush. The sun had yet to rise—Pauline remembers it was around three o'clock in the morning when the men first entered the compound—so it was difficult to see where they were going or what tree stumps or bushes might be in their path. If they walked cautiously and therefore, slowly, the women were beaten; yet, if they were to trip and fall, the rebels threatened to shoot.

After about thirty minutes of ferrying the stolen goods, the women were ordered to put everything down, to turn in the direction they had come from, and to run without glancing behind them. In a few minutes, they came across the sixteen women who had been left behind: they had tried to follow the group, but halted when one of the rebels discovered them and threatened to shoot them if they continued. The thirty-six of them, reunited, returned to the compound, and to the chapel. When Pauline entered the chapel after this first encounter with an armed group, her first encounter as a member of the convent, she felt her faith still whole and protected. She did not question her own faith in a benevolent God, but questioned what it was God was trying to teach her: "Anything that happens to me, be it negative or positive, it has a message for me. And it increases my faith. I don't blame God."

It was 1985, before the war began in the north. "That was just the beginning."

The Sisterhood

Just as she had tried to join the Crusaders at a young age, Pauline had been trying to enter the convent for years. She was refused numerous times because of her age; at last, when she finished her O level education, she was accepted as an aspirant of the Little Sisters of Mary Immaculate in Gulu.¹¹ In the culture of northern Uganda, women are expected to marry, which brings dowries and wealth to their families. Consequently, Pauline's brothers were against her joining the congregation. She "stood her ground" and with the strong support of her mother, she entered the sisterhood in 1984. Pauline was only eighteen years old.

The Little Sisters had been active in Gulu for years, and it was these nuns that Pauline had admired as a child. It was only after she was accepted into the congregation that she began learning of their dedication to raising the standard of women in Uganda. Their work centers on educating women and raising awareness of domestic violence and other violence against women. "When I joined and found this out, I knew that was the right place, that this was where I was supposed to be." Her first few months were spent as an aspirant, when she moved to the community and learned the essentials of community life. From January to June of 1985, Pauline was an apostolate, one who is sent out to work with the community. She still remained in the convent with the other Sisters, but was sent out to work with people outside in the community. Her final training was the period of the novitiate, from July 1985 until January of 1987. This final year and a half was an intensive period of training in prayer, study, and community life. Pauline describes it as a time of "molding," of the shaping of her character.

We are taught so many things during this time. We are taught the different types of prayer. We are taught to share the virtues of love, sharing, simplicity, and humility. And then we are taught community life because it is not about

¹¹ The Congregation of the Little Sisters of Mary Immaculate was founded by Bishop Angelo Negri, a member of the Comboni Missionaries from Italy, in 1942. There are Little Sisters in northern Uganda, Kenya, and northern Italy.

individuals. Whatever you have is not yours; everything is in common. Even if you are working and getting a big salary, it is not yours. You don't see your salary—they send it straight to the account of the congregation.

Moreover, it was a time of discovery: finding that community life in the convent was not entirely different from community life in her village. Her upbringing and the example impressed on her by her mother prepared her well for the Congregation of the Little Sisters.

Day of Dedication

She wore a pure white dress and a crown, “like Our Lady.” A rosary of fifty beads hung from her left side. A cord with the cross was draped over her neckline and the seven buttons of her dress. The seven buttons symbolized the Seven Sorrows¹² of Our Lady, the Mother of Christ, whom she remembered throughout the ceremony. She carried a solitary candle in the procession, proclaiming and identifying with the light of Christ.

She vowed obedience to a God she never doubted, to a God she trusted before she understood the meaning of faith. She vowed obedience to a Church, a Church that was now entrusted with the gravity of someone's entire life and work. It was a vow to be dedicated to the calling she could not escape. Her work would be the mission of the Church in the world.

She vowed poverty. It was not a vow simply about detachment from the things of this world, of voluntary poverty; it was a vow to share the gifts of this life with the people she would live with, and with whomever may cross her path. Her wealth would be in her passion for her work and for others.

¹² The Seven Sorrows refer to seven moments in the life of Mary, the Mother of Christ. They are: 1) the prophecy of Simeon about Jesus; 2) the flight to Egypt; 3) the loss of Jesus in the Temple; 4) Jesus carrying the cross; 5) the crucifixion of Jesus; 6) Mary receiving the dead body of Jesus; 7) the burial of Jesus and the closing of the tomb.

She vowed chastity, to stay pure not only in body but in mind and spirit as well. The intention of chastity is love, to stay free of a pervasive physical love so that a love for all others may pervade her actions. Her purity would be protected so she could serve others with a deeper love.

“The Lord is my shepherd. There is nothing I shall want.” She chose these words from Psalm 23 as part of her profession.¹³ She claimed them as words that represent her life, words that would be her guide as a Sister, strengthening her constantly:

Those words are everything to me, ‘There is nothing I shall want.’ God gives me more than anything I need. When I get up in the morning I am alive. He takes care of me at night. The air I’m breathing, anything I do, the people I meet, the friends I have—all of those are because of God. I shall not take that for granted.

Pauline made her vows alongside fifteen other women that day, the sixth of January, 1987. It was the Day of Epiphany,¹⁴ and they were making known their commitment to the work of Christ and the Church. They vowed before the General Mother of the congregation and before the gathering of family and friends in the church—over 1,000 witnesses. The new Sisters received a prayer book, a Bible, the constitution of the congregation, and a new rosary, all blessed by the Bishop.

It was not only a solemn day of dedication, but a celebratory occasion as well. The Mass itself was lively, with plenty of music and an energetic choir; the participants and witnesses danced and clapped in the aisles. After the ceremony, the congregation had prepared a reception for everybody to visit and feast with their family and friends. Pauline’s mother, of course, was present, as well as the rest of her family, including the brothers who had initially been opposed to

¹³ New Revised Standard Version

¹⁴ In Roman Catholicism, the Christmas season begins with Advent, the fourth Sunday before Christmas day, and ends with the Day of Epiphany. It is typically a day to celebrate the birth of Christ and to focus on the mission of the Church in the world.

her decision. They all brought gifts, mostly animals—goats, chickens, cows—to share with the community of sisters in building a farm. After the reception with the community in Gulu, Pauline’s family organized yet another party in her honor, with lots of entertainment and rejoicing for the life she had chosen to live. Joyful prayer overflowed during these gatherings: the ceremony, the reception, and the family party. She gave thanks to a God who had brought her to this time and place.

Journey amidst a War

The commencement of Sister Pauline’s journey as a nun coincided with the beginning of the war that is still raging in northern Uganda. Though there was much rejoicing that day in 1987 when she took her vows, the year that had just concluded was a violent one in the north. It saw the formation of insurgent groups in the north as Yoweri Museveni’s National Resistance Army (NRA) came to power in the capital, Kampala. Former soldiers of the Ugandan National Liberation Army (UNLA), many of whom were Acholi, were defeated by the NRA and fled through the north to Sudan, where they formed an insurgent group called the Uganda People’s Democratic Army (UPDA).¹⁵ The Acholi people had several grievances that influenced some people to lend their support to the insurgents, or even to fight against Museveni and his new government in Kampala.¹⁶ The Acholi grievances are often viewed as historical, as the British colonialists had a policy of indirect rule whereby ethnic tribes from the south, particularly the Baganda people, ruled the country at the expense of those in the north. The Acholi were often considered good soldiers; thus, at various times in Ugandan history, they have been preeminent

¹⁵ The following brief history is taken largely from Robert Gersony, “The Anguish of Northern Uganda” (Kampala: U.S. Embassy and United States Agency for International Development [USAID] mission, 1997).

¹⁶ The NRA’s political wing became known as the National Resistance Movement, or NRM. It was the only political party allowed in Uganda until 2005, though Museveni referred to this as a “no-party” system.

in the army. This preeminence has also led to targeted repression, such as during Idi Amin's rule, when he removed the Acholi from the army and had many of them killed. But it was their military defeat by the NRA, and some instances of brutality by the NRA in the north, that were the sources of much anger in the mid- to late-1980s.

This was also the time that a spiritual movement formed, the Holy Spirit Movement, led by Alice Auma, better known as Alice Lakwena.¹⁷ One of Lakwena's main spiritual teachings was that the Acholi people needed to be cleansed for atrocities that had been committed in the Luwero Triangle¹⁸ during the war between the UNLA and the NRA. UNLA soldiers (many of whom were Acholi, though not exclusively so) had committed grave human rights abuses against civilians between 1983 and the end of the war in 1986. Lakwena, like the UPDA, wanted to ultimately overthrow Museveni's government, but her followers often went into battle completely unarmed. They were known to rub shea oil over their bodies to protect them from bullets in battle; they also believed that stones would transform into grenades when thrown at the enemy. The Holy Spirit Movement scored several surprising victories, even reaching Jinja, about fifty kilometers from the capital, before being defeated by the NRA there in November of 1987.

After the loss at Jinja, Lakwena fled to Kenya. Her father, Severino Likoya Kiberu, took over the movement, calling himself "God the Father." His time as leader was brief, as Joseph Kony and his followers became more prominent by 1987, the year often cited as the beginning of the war in the north. Kony claims to be a cousin of Lakwena; he likewise believes he is a spirit medium who is told how to conduct the rebellion against Museveni's government. His overall objective is to overthrow the Ugandan government on behalf of the Acholi people and rule the

¹⁷ *Lakwena* means "messenger." Alice believed she was channeling the spirit of a World War I veteran who had died in northern Uganda.

¹⁸ Luwero is a district north of Kampala in southern Uganda. During the war between the UNLA and the NRA, it was a stronghold of the NRA.

country using the Ten Commandments. As one analyst has noted, “The LRA’s raison d’etre is to disrupt, wreak mayhem, and bring shame, dishonor, and illegitimacy to Museveni’s administration.”¹⁹ The movement was first known as the Lord’s Salvation Army, then the United Christian Democratic Army, and finally, as it is still known today, the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA). Though the rebel group has similar objectives as the Holy Spirit Movement, their tactics are brutal, particularly as they affect the civilian population.

It is in this tense climate that Sister Pauline’s journey with the Congregation of the Little Sisters of Mary Immaculate began. In the early years of the conflict, she lost many of her fellow Sisters who were killed in ambushes while traveling on the roads, or were taken from their beds at night. Once a bomb fell in the open area of the compound: “If it had fallen on the roof, I think most of us would have died.” Sister Pauline and the other Sisters learned they had to prepare tea very early in the morning and then race back to their rooms to hide themselves for the day when the rebels were reportedly in the area. They had to fast, drinking tea only, because if they appeared outside their room, the rebels would either shoot or abduct them. If the rebels also woke early on certain days, the women learned to go without tea even, concealing themselves in the rafters of their rooms until it was safe to leave.

Similar to the rebels who were initially hesitant to enter the chapel in 1985 when Sister Pauline was still in the novitiate, another group of rebels came during those early years of the conflict who understood the sanctuary of a church. The Sisters were celebrating Mass one morning and the rebels just stood at the door of the church, ordering the priest, “If you don’t leave Mass I’m going to shoot you!”

¹⁹ Joyce Neu, “Launching a Dialogue for Peace between the LRA and the GOU,” Conflict Analysis for the Northern Uganda Peace Initiative (NUPI), Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice, University of San Diego. 16 March 2004. Available at <http://peace.sandiego.edu/reports/trips/Neu%20Trip%20report%203-04%5B1%5D.pdf>.

Everyone else in the church scrambled under pews and tables, but the priest stood his ground, “You can shoot me if you’d like, but I’m not leaving Mass.”

The rebels wavered, and then decided to leave, threatening to return in ten minutes. The priest and the Sisters finished Mass at the same pace as usual. “By the time they came back, we had finished and gone.”

Also like the incident in 1985, Sister Pauline felt her faith constantly protected despite the often anxious and frightening events. Some people would come to her, asking, “Why is this happening to us? Why are we suffering?” Sister Pauline would counsel them, trying to encourage them to have faith. She concedes that those same questions cross her mind, but rather than rejecting the faith that has sustained her, “it just leads me to pray more.” Likewise, when she took her final vows in 1993, committing to remain a Sister for life, she chose Psalm 116:12, “How can I repay the Lord for his goodness to me?”²⁰

Reflecting from the time I was growing up, I chose that verse. I was still very young when I started knowing myself and knowing God. I started seeing the goodness of God to me one by one. Those major events that took place in my life, they were all because of the goodness of God to me. Everything I have is a gift from him. And that goodness will still continue.

Formal and Informal Education

The fighting in the north did not keep Sister Pauline from pursuing her education, a goal that had been instilled in her from a young age. Education was always a priority in her family—the reason she was able to go to a high-quality primary school, and why her family and friends readily celebrated her academic successes. She always aspired to an A level education,²¹ but she wanted to become a Sister first; thus, she embarked on her A level work in 1988, the year after

²⁰ New Revised Standard Version

²¹ A level refers to Advanced level education and is typically done between the ages of sixteen and eighteen. In order to go to a university, a student must have passed A level.

she took her vows, and then entered Makerere University in Kampala in 1990. At Makerere, she studied education to learn how to instill the passion she had for learning in others. Rather than living in the dormitories at the university, she stayed in the community of Little Sisters in Kampala, which was only a short distance from the school. She thrived on the intense conversations in the classroom and on the friendships she developed with a small group of seven other students. In 1992, she carried this enthusiasm back to the tumultuous north and began teaching geography and Christian education, both in O level and A level, primarily at Sacred Heart Secondary School, the school for girls run by her community of Little Sisters in Gulu. However, a process of informal and indirect education soon confronted her starkly. Her brother was abducted²² by the LRA in 1991; her brother, Caesar, passed away in 1993; and Sister Pauline herself encountered the rebels three times within a two-year period.

Seven Stones

There are two teams, seven stones, one ball. They could not use a real ball because there was little money for frivolous objects, so they made do with thick grass or banana fibers rolled and tied into a ball, or they simply used unripe oranges. The ball is thrown at the opposing team, who runs and dodges the ball while attempting to pile seven stones in the middle, the largest stone on the bottom. If they can stack seven stones, the team gets one point. If they are hit with the ball by the other team, they switch sides, and the other team tries to stack the seven stones.

It was Sister Pauline's favorite game as a child, and still is her favorite. She helped to teach the game to her brother, James,²³ when he was just a child. On a Saturday in 1991, he was at the family home in Minakulu, sweeping the compound, trying to finish his household chores

²² The "brother" referred to here is what Americans would consider a nephew, her brother's son. In the culture of northern Uganda, it is common to refer to nephews and nieces as "brothers" and "sisters."

²³ James is one of Donasiano's sons.

so he could play with his siblings and friends. Because the house lay on the main road in Gulu, it was an easy target for the LRA when they needed supplies—or new abductees to fill their ranks. His other siblings were able to run away, but James was snatched quickly. He has never come back. Sister Pauline and her family were told that he was sold for guns, possibly in Sudan. But it is all rumor. He may have been killed trying to escape. He may have been killed fighting government soldiers. He may still be alive. There are many possibilities. The only fact is that he has not returned, and the stones lie scattered in the compound.

A January Goodbye

Caesar, Sister Pauline's youngest brother and childhood best friend, was diagnosed with cancer in late 1992. She visited him in the hospital, often preparing food to take to him and keeping him company as his condition worsened over a period of weeks. One Saturday, Sister Pauline stayed with him as he was "happy and active" and having a relatively good day. Sister Pauline was organizing the new Sisters who were professing that January (as she was to take her final vows that year, 1993), so she spent the next day, Sunday, preparing for the ceremony that was to occur in the coming days. She sent food to Caesar through one of the Sisters, who returned and reported him in good condition and spirits. The following evening, Sister Pauline returned to the hospital to visit, but Caesar was not in his room. She asked a nurse who responded only, "The person in that room passed away." Jacinta, Sister Pauline's mother, was distraught, as was Caesar's wife and the rest of the family; they arranged for Caesar's body to be taken home for burial without sending word to Sister Pauline at the convent that Caesar had passed away that January morning, before dawn.

Rebels at Home

“We are going to take her with us to the bush to pray for us.” This is the only justification given by one of the LRA rebels when a neighbor asked them why they had come to kidnap Sister Pauline. They gave only that reason.

It had been a relaxing evening, one of the first such nights Sister Pauline had had in several months. She rarely had the opportunity to go home to Minakulu to see her mother, much less spend two days there. That weekend in 1993 was to be a much needed break from her teaching duties in Gulu. As usually occurs when Sister Pauline goes home, many visitors from Minakulu came to see her that first night she returned, to eat, drink, and relax as one community. They brought lots of food and the local brew, and talked and celebrated until late in the night. She was exhausted and she was unable to keep her eyes open past eleven o'clock. Some people remained, finishing off the food and drink, and helping to clean the compound.

Her mother shook her awake two hours later. The rebels had taken the back roads in Minakulu and were searching for her. They had gone to a neighbor's home and were harassing the man, trying to find out where Sister Pauline lived. The man's wife escaped through the back of the house, “leaving the husband to be beaten by the rebels,” in order to warn Sister Pauline and her mother. She was clothed in only a night dress, but before fleeing from the house, she grabbed her veil and a rosary. She and her mother were only able to run a few meters away from the house before they heard the rebels arrive, shouting, “Where is she? Where is she?”

As she did instinctively when she and her brother were attacked by Amin's soldiers in 1979, Sister Pauline and her mother hid themselves in the tall grass just outside the compound. It was much colder this time in the grass; it was the rainy season, so the stalks were thick with moisture, chilling the night air. When the rebels could not find her, they headed for her uncle's

house. Her uncle, Opira Martin, was a local businessman whose home was near their own compound. Sister Pauline could hear his screams from her hideout in the grass.

He kept begging them not to kill him, crying, “You’re killing me for nothing.” So first they cut his lips off. Then they took the sharpest part of their guns to his head, slicing almost to his brain. He went silent. The rebels—and Sister Pauline from below the grass—believed he was dead. “They were looting and they thought he was dead already, so they were just busy looting—looting and laughing in the compound.” The rebels stayed until dawn; Sister Pauline and her mother lay in the grass until seven in the morning, unsure if they would return to look for her again.

When they rose from the grass, they immediately went to find out if Martin was still alive. He was indeed still breathing, but, “he was all swollen and didn’t look like a human being, with the mouth cut, the head swollen so big and disfigured.” They arranged for him to be taken to the hospital. By that time, word had reached the Archbishop of Gulu that the rebels had been searching for Sister Pauline, so a vehicle was sent to Minakulu. Sister Pauline was unable to go to the hospital to be with her uncle, but had to return to Gulu immediately.

Her uncle survived, but because he was not treated immediately and fell unconscious for a long period of time, he suffered brain damage. Sister Pauline still laments, “He is no longer himself. Up to today, he just sits and stares, but can’t do anything.”

The rebels wanted to abduct Sister Pauline so that she would pray for them in the bush. She wonders why they did not realize she was already praying for them, praying that this senseless conflict would end.

Calling Them by Name

Sister Pauline was passing the time under the verandah in the convent, ironing her dresses and being entertained by some other Sisters who were telling her stories and making her laugh. It was a weekend, so no one was at work at the schools where most of the women were teachers. It was midday, early in 1994; they were waiting for lunch.

She remembers glancing up from her ironing and looking across the courtyard, only to see the Mother General running into one of the many buildings of the compound. “Why is Mother running today?” she thought innocently. Sister Pauline returned to her ironing, only to notice that the other Sisters she had been chatting and laughing with had run into the closest building and were whispering to her, trying to get her attention so she could join them and they could shut the door. Flustered and still not entirely sure what was taking place, she started gathering her dresses and putting the iron away. The rebels spotted her before she could finish. They were approaching her and if she were to turn and run, she knew she would be shot.

At first, they taunted her and tried to shame her into helping them: “Come on, Sister. We are fighting for you, living in the bush day and night without eating or bathing. And here you are enjoying life, getting to iron your dresses and eat food. Give us the key to the store so we can enjoy life like you.”

Sister Pauline thought quickly and answered them, “I’m a visitor and I don’t stay at this convent. I stay in Kampala. That’s where my community is, so I’m here just as a visitor. I arrived yesterday, that’s why I’m ironing my dresses, so I don’t know where the store is or where the key is.”

One man came and shoved a gun to her back. “If you’re lying, we’re going to kill you right now.”

Sister Pauline stuck to her story, not fearing the threats, and instead becoming adamant with the rebels, “I’m telling you, I just arrived yesterday. I don’t know where anything is.”

The rebels relented, taking the gun off her back, and demanded only that she get them supplies from the laundry room, which was the room where the other Sisters had gathered and was near where Sister Pauline had been ironing. The rebels could see supplies through the window, but failed to see the Sisters who were hiding there. They wanted soaps, as well as needles and thread, and decided to leave momentarily while she gathered the goods, saying “We’ll come back to find that you have put these things out for us or we will have to kill you.”

As the rebels left the immediate vicinity to go and look for other things to loot, or other Sisters to help them locate the store, Sister Pauline spoke to the Sisters who were hiding in the laundry room. She did not want to enter the room in case the rebels returned and discovered them all there, so she had the Sisters collect everything and then go back to hide again. The Sisters pleaded with her to hide with them, but she knew they would all be in danger if she chose to hide or escape.

The rebels came back a few minutes later, shouting from afar, “Do you have what we need?”

“Of course,” she affirmed.

They took everything, then told Sister Pauline, “We are coming back exactly at two o’clock. We need petrol, so have it ready when we get back.”

Though she was still playing the role of the visitor, she agreed to their demands, just so they would leave. She reported everything to the other Sisters and the Mother General. The community had several drums of petrol for their own vehicles, and decided to roll them to their underground storage area, which was hidden from casual observers. They also decided to remain

in one large group for the rest of the afternoon, so that no one would have to face the rebels alone.

The Sisters made their way to the refectory around one o'clock since they had yet to eat. The rebels appeared again within minutes. They marched the Sisters outside and some rebels began looting from the refectory. Those outside demanded the petrol they mentioned earlier, but the Mother General responded, "We only have what is in our vehicles. You can take that, but we don't have anything else." The rebels went with their jerrycans and siphoned the petrol from the vehicles. Some were getting angry that there was only a small amount; they suggested to the others that they take some of the Sisters to the bush to help them carry the things looted from the refectory.

As the rebels discussed this idea, one of the Sisters made eye contact with the youngest rebel. He had been a student of hers. She motioned to some of the other Sisters, who were also teachers, and they began recognizing more and more of the teenage rebels. They started calling the boys by name and asking them, "How can you think of doing this to us?"

"We can see everything you've looted, you don't need any more. And you don't need us in the bush with you," they kept on talking to the rebels.

The boys were visibly uncomfortable. When their commanders realized what was going on, they ordered the boys to put everything back that they had taken. The rebels promptly left, without anything they had initially come for.

Well-Played Tactics

Lacor market is lined with greens, tomatoes, fruits, maize—anything the Sisters need for the week, they buy at this market. Like every day at the market, there were people everywhere

buying their goods for their week on the day in 1994 Sister Pauline and three other Sisters came to shop. There were even UPDF soldiers there,²⁴ buying bananas and oranges and eating right there in the market. They were friendly and greeted people while they enjoyed their food.

The government soldiers had caused no disturbances, so nobody noticed when they were gone. People were busy bargaining and socializing; it took a moment to realize what was happening. Within minutes of what everyone believed were government soldiers leaving, groups of rebels surrounded the market, all entering at the same time from different directions. There was no escape, though some shoppers tried to run and were shot. Everyone was ordered to sit down, as rebels came and tied their hands behind their backs. “We were abducted.”

The rebels had posed as government soldiers, wearing similar uniforms as the UPDF, in order to survey the market. Almost everyone from the market was abducted that day and forced to move with the rebels to the bush. The rebels kept telling them they were going to be killed once they went further into the bush. In response, Sister Pauline decided to use her own tactics to try and change the course of events. She began limping, just a little at first. They tried threatening her to make her move faster. Soon she made the limp more exaggerated and began falling down every few steps. The rebels, realizing she was only slowing the whole group down, decided to let her go, sending one rebel to escort her back to the roadside, but the rest kept moving through the bush.

After her release, Sister Pauline felt guilty as the other Sisters were still held by the rebels. Back at the convent, the rebels sent a message to her: it was a ransom note asking for medicine and money in exchange for the Sisters. While the Mother General decided against meeting their demands, the rebels released the other Sisters anyway after another five days. The three Sisters returned, eager to see Sister Pauline. Once they were all free, they laughed over her

²⁴ UPDF stands for Uganda People’s Defense Forces, the government army.

well-played tactics. They were all relieved that she was safe, and joked that they wished they had thought of limping, too.

Education Abroad

After the abduction of James, the death of one of her brothers, and the subsequent encounters with the LRA rebels, Sister Pauline returned to formal education in 1995. She was chosen by the Mother General to study in the Mater Ecclesiae at the Pontifical Urbaniana University in Rome, Italy. She studied catechesis, or Christian doctrine, as well as psychology, anthropology, Catholic social teaching, and other subjects that would help her ministry to women, youth, and the elderly in Gulu. It was a three-year course.

She arrived at the airport in Rome and was greeted by two Sisters from Africa who spoke French and Portuguese. Sister Pauline knew neither language. Somehow, they found enough words to tell Sister Pauline that whenever someone spoke to her in Italian, she was to respond, “*Grazie*.” She had no idea what it meant. They arrived at the university for supper and people seemed very excited and quite welcoming, talking quickly in Italian or in their native languages that Sister Pauline did not know. Very few spoke English, and of course, no one spoke her native Luo. She kept saying, “*Grazie*.” And soon she realized how grateful she was for the opportunity to study in Rome, so she truly meant it when she said, “*Grazie*.”

The entire course work was conducted in Italian, thus, the forty students in Sister Pauline’s class spent the first six months in intensive language courses. After the first month, the students could converse, read and sing in church, and generally follow along in class. The students were given examinations following the six months of language coursework: Sister

Pauline received first class distinction in the Italian language. “After six months, we were speaking so fluently and actually lecturing and writing in the class.”

During her studies, Sister Pauline visited communities of Little Sisters throughout northern Italy; she and the other students also went on student tours in other areas of Italy as well as France. Their itinerary also included trips outside of Europe to Israel and other areas important to biblical history.

Though her reason for studying in Italy was formal education, she also learned about life and faith staying in the community at school. She was quickly recognized as a leader and put in charge of the African students. “I enjoyed the way of life there. The way we were staying in the community was like a real home with one family. We were Sisters, Brothers, priests, girls, boys. There was a lot of love and sharing. We were living in harmony and were always happy.” She saw the potential of living in peace: they came from different backgrounds, with different languages and different cultures, yet they managed to live in peace with one another. She kept wondering why, if all these diverse people could live harmoniously, could there not be peace in northern Uganda as well? As a part of this community of peace for just a short time, Sister Pauline’s vision for her work and country expanded.

Dampened Homecoming

Upon the completion of her studies in Italy, Sister Pauline was offered a scholarship for a master’s degree at Urbaniana Universita. As part of the congregation of Little Sisters, the decision was put in the hands of the Mother General. She decided it was essential for Sister Pauline to return to her community and teaching duties in Uganda.

Before Sister Pauline left Italy, she bought souvenirs and clothing for her family. Upon her return to Uganda, she wanted to stop in Minakulu to spend time with her family before resuming life and her responsibilities in the convent. Knowing she should buy food and other goods before returning home, she stopped in town to shop. She saw someone she knew and was excited to meet someone familiar so soon upon her arrival; but the person seemed uncomfortable and did not want to approach her. Sister Pauline went up to the person, who greeted her and then asked, “Have you come home to see the grave of your brother?”

Disconcerted by such a question, Sister Pauline could only respond, “Which brother?”

The person told her it was Donasiano, her eldest brother, nine years her senior. Sister Pauline “was in the middle of town with everybody around,” so she tried not to react strongly. She excused herself from the conversation and made her way home, praying for the courage to face her family.

When she returned home, they told her he had fallen sick and by the time he was taken to the hospital, the illness—they are not sure what it was—had overcome him and he died not long after. Sister Pauline was not upset with her family for not informing her; she was far away in Europe studying and it would have been extremely difficult to contact her. She stayed in Minakulu for two weeks, encouraging and comforting her family, watching them enjoy the gifts she had brought from Italy, and sharing stories of her time there. “The clothes I bought for Donasiano are still with me up to today.”

During her two weeks in Minakulu with her family, the Mother General came to her home. She had been contacted by Catholic Relief Services (CRS),²⁵ an international nongovernmental organization (NGO). They wanted a Sister to open a CRS office in the north;

²⁵ Catholic Relief Services is a relief and development agency founded by Catholic bishops in the United States. They do work in over ninety countries and became involved in northern Uganda in 1996.

the Mother General and her counselors chose Sister Pauline. Sister Pauline thought there were several Sisters who would be good for the job and wondered why the Mother General had chosen her. “But, of course, you may not know what God has prepared for you.” She packed her things and traveled to Kampala for training. For two months, she was trained by CRS in management and administration. The organization wanted her to open a new office in Kitgum, a district northeast of Gulu, but Sister Pauline still wanted to teach at the secondary school for girls in Gulu—she wanted to remain loyal to the Congregation’s mission of raising the standard of women. They agreed on a compromise: Sister Pauline would remain teaching at Sacred Heart and work part-time in administration at the CRS office in Gulu.

Fifty-One Girls

In 1998, Sister Pauline had her fourth encounter with LRA rebels, this time at the school where she was teaching, Sacred Heart Secondary School, on the grounds of her convent in Gulu.

In northern Uganda, UPDF soldiers are constantly on patrol—outside of internally displaced peoples’ (IDP) camps, schools, and all through the communities and the bush, yet it is common for UPDF soldiers to leave their posts when they receive reports that the LRA rebels are in the area or are about to attack somewhere. Sister Pauline recalls asking a UPDF soldier why they sometimes fail to protect the people they are positioned to guard. He responded that he is poor and never gets paid, furthermore, “why would I want my parents to weep because I am dead? We are all important to our parents.” Thus, despite the fact that Sacred Heart is guarded by government soldiers, there is never a guarantee that they will protect the people.

She remembers the exact number: fifty-one. There were fifty-one girls taken from their school one night in 1998. It was one night when the soldiers decided to abandon their posts and

the people they were to protect. It was one night when the Sisters were powerless to do anything for their students.

The rebels heard the UPDF soldiers leaving as the sun went down. All the girls were in their dormitories, while the Sisters were in their sleeping quarters in the convent. The rebels came with bright torches and surrounded the dormitories, shouting for the occupants to come outside so they could tie them for their journey to the bush. The Sisters heard the girls screaming—“Oh, how they were crying”—but, they could only wait in their rooms and call the local UPDF commanders to plead for their help. The rebels never ventured to the rooms where the Sisters slept, instead, the Sisters heard one of the commanders say, “Leave the Sisters. They will not help us in the bush.” Previously, the rebels had tried to kidnap Sister Pauline so she could pray for them in the bush; now, the true intentions of the rebels were clear. They wanted to abduct the young girls to be used as sex slaves; however, the Sisters would be “of no use to them sexually.” Fifty-one girls were kidnapped, while the Sisters kept phoning for help. The UPDF soldiers returned forty minutes later to find only the Sisters remaining, angry at the soldiers for abandoning them, angry at themselves for their powerlessness.

Many of the girls were able to escape; one by one over the years they have returned. One who is still in the bush has become a rebel leader. Within the past year, she has written to the Sisters, warning them she wants to attack the school and abduct more girls. Sister Pauline recognizes this as one more manifestation of the cycle of violence and has tried to communicate to the girl that she has the power within her to break that cycle. She wrote back to the girl, “Whatever happened to you should not happen again to others. You didn’t wish to be abducted. You should not seek revenge on those who are innocent.”

Despite her personal pain over the tragedies in her family and the recent rebel encounter, Sister Pauline persevered. Working her two jobs, she taught from morning to lunch time, moving to the CRS office by two o'clock and working there until evening. After two years of this schedule and after two more years of witnessing the suffering of the northern Ugandan people, Sister Pauline realized she needed to be out of the office and on the ground, alongside the people in their struggle to survive the conflict. As early as 1991, the suffering of her own family was actualized when her brother was abducted; by 2001, she found that every person in northern Uganda was affected in some way by the conflict, many of them living in IDP camps.

The LRA had been abducting people and then the government put people in camps. There was just so much conflict in the communities. That prompted me to begin thinking that instead of working as an administrator, it is better that I take the opportunity to work for human rights, peacebuilding, and conflict management.

Her employers at CRS recognized her gifts of understanding and compassion as well as her desire to work with the people, and asked her to become their Peacebuilding Project Officer. "Administrative work means you are always in the office, making sure all the projects run. But I was outside more with the people." By early 2001, Sister Pauline stopped teaching to commit fully to the work of peacebuilding in northern Uganda.

Abduction and Reintegration

In their war against the Museveni government, the LRA has never failed to inflict suffering on the civilian population of the north. As the rebel who told Sister Pauline at the convent in 1994, "We are fighting for you," the rebels purport to fight for the benefit of the Acholi people in the north; yet, they steal from, rape, abduct, mutilate, and kill those very people. It is the same perverted logic whereby the LRA wants to rule the country using the Ten

Commandments, one of which is the commandment, “Thou shall not kill.” Thousands of people have been killed in the nineteen-year war.

One of the main LRA tactics is the abduction of children into their ranks. The LRA kidnaps children, both boys and girls, to fight against the government, and ostensibly, against their own people—often their own families. The most common estimates for the number of children abducted are between 20,000-30,000; some organizations working in the north approximate that 50-70 percent of the composition of the LRA at any given time is abducted children.²⁶ The boys, and oftentimes the girls, are indoctrinated into the ways of the rebel group. This indoctrination usually involves the child being forced to murder a person, sometimes someone from one’s own family or village. The new child soldier is forced to kill the person; if s/he refuses, s/he is killed as an example to others who may hesitate when commanded to kill. If a child tries to escape, the punishment is usually death, though some are forced to do other things. A ten-year old girl who tried to escape was forced to smear her body with the blood of a freshly dead soldier “in order to instill fear in her.” This same girl was forced to work in Kony’s fields in Sudan. She would work from six o’clock in the morning until sunset. Severely dehydrated, she drank her own urine, as well as the urine of other women. Girls are not only made to kill or to work in the fields; they have to become sex slaves of the top rebel commanders. They are referred to as the “wives” of the commanders, are raped, and often bear children in the bush. In addition, many contract sexually transmitted diseases, particularly HIV/AIDS.

²⁶ See Anne C. Richard, “Members’ Briefing: An Update on the Conflict in Northern Uganda,” International Rescue Committee, Statement for the Record before the Congressional Human Rights Caucus, 14 April 2005; World Vision, “Pawns of Politics: Children, Conflict and Peace in Northern Uganda,” Kampala, 2004.

Along with her brother James, who was abducted in 1991, three of Sister Pauline's other brothers²⁷ were abducted together in 2002. Of the three of them, two returned and have since shared their stories with Sister Pauline. One was forced to participate, as part of a group of ten newly abducted children, in killing an elderly man who had been abducted but was deemed of no use because his legs were swollen and he could no longer walk. The new abductees beat the man to death. Sister Pauline's brother, Richard, knew that if he refused to participate, he would be killed. He helped to kill the man and then escaped from the LRA two days later.

Like Sister Pauline's brother, sometimes the rebels escape. Through the Amnesty Act of 2000, rebels who decide to leave the bush and return to their communities are given immunity from prosecution for the acts they committed while part of the rebel group. The amnesty is seen as a step in ending the conflict, as the formerly abducted children (FAC), formerly abducted persons (FAP), returnees, or former rebels²⁸ can be reintegrated into the community. For Sister Pauline, the law is sensible insofar as the majority of the rebels do not choose the life they are forced to lead in the bush and are brainwashed into committing their horrific crimes.

An entire system has developed in northern Uganda for the reintegration of returnees. When the rebels are able to escape, some choose to go straight to their homes; according to the Amnesty Act, they are supposed to report directly to the barracks of the armed forces. After they are registered by the UPDF, the returnees are taken to reception centers. There are two reception centers in Gulu district run by organizations that Sister Pauline and CRS work with: World Vision and Gulu Support the Children Organization (GUSCO). Other reception centers include one in Kitgum district, run by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), and another in Pader district, run by Caritas, a CRS partner. The centers are designed for returnees to have the

²⁷ Like James, these are nephews of Sister Pauline.

²⁸ In literature on the conflict, these terms are used interchangeably to characterize those who return from the bush.

essentials, including food, water, clothing, and shelter; to receive psychosocial trauma healing and counseling; and to receive help in trying to locate their families, who oftentimes are in IDP camps.²⁹

Richard, Sister Pauline's brother who was forced to kill and then escaped two days later, was only able to escape after he was beaten and left for dead. He had tried to break away previously, but when he was caught, the other rebels sliced his head using a panga, a kind of machete, and he was left under a tree to die. As night and rain fell, he eventually woke. He began walking; it took him two weeks to stagger to a village where someone found him and brought him to a reception center where he stayed for three months, receiving medical care and rehabilitation as well as psychosocial counseling.

During their time in the reception centers, returnees have the chance to reflect on and talk about what has happened in their lives. Most likely, they abducted and killed in the bush, so they feel they need to be purified. They witnessed and took part in horrific acts of violence and are still haunted by what they have done; their minds must be cleansed. They have broken the harmony of all of northern Uganda; they want to repair what has been severed, but only if they can be welcomed back into the community.

Returnees may ask to be cleansed for what they have done in the bush. In traditional, communal, cleansing ceremonies that focus on reconciliation, the returnees seek purification and a new beginning in the community. The ceremonies are conducted by Ker Kwaro Acholi, a CRS partner organization of Acholi traditional leaders. Ker Kwaro performs the most visible role in

²⁹ Recent estimates put the number of internally displaced people between 1.4 and 1.9 million, or between 80 and 95 percent of the population of the north. See Anne C. Richard, "Members' Briefing: An Update"; Catholic Relief Services, "Northern Uganda: The Forgotten War"; Human Rights Watch, "Uprooted and Forgotten: Impunity and Human Rights Abuses in Northern Uganda," Vol. 7, No. 6 (September 2005).

the production of the ceremony, while Sister Pauline, representing CRS, provides the material and spiritual foundations of the ritual.

The ceremony, called *Nyono Tong Gweno*, or the “Stepping of the Egg,” is highly symbolic. The central ritual involves three actions: the returnee steps on an egg, jumps over a slippery reed, and then jumps over a pole commonly used to open granaries. The egg is a symbol of purity: it is white, with no mouth to speak—no opportunity to demean others. Stepping on and breaking the egg symbolizes that the person is now purified, free of the guilt associated with the acts done as a rebel. The reed, or *opobo*, is split into two and becomes very slippery. The act of jumping over it further signifies that the returnee is cleansed from the atrocities committed while in the bush. The final act of jumping over the pole used to open granaries is an indication that the returnee is welcomed back into the community: s/he is free to eat as part of the collective, to share a meal in anyone’s home.

When the returnees ask to be cleansed³⁰ and a ceremony is to take place, Sister Pauline solicits the funds from CRS that will be needed for the objects used in the ceremony (eggs are a scarce commodity in this conflict area), for transport for community leaders, and for the communal meal after the ritual. But it is the words she speaks after the ritual—words that resonate in both the traditional culture of the Acholi people and the Christianity which is also practiced here—that inspire the people to hope and to forgive. To the returnees, she speaks words of comfort and courage: “You are not an outsider. You should feel free to be a part of the community. Join us and do not be afraid.” To the community, she implores: “Accept the returnees as your own children. Forgive. It will be difficult. Reconciliation does not take place in a day; it is a process. If you welcome them and eat with them, that is already the beginning of reconciliation.”

³⁰ It is a strictly voluntary process.

During this speech, which she refers to as “sensitization,” Sister Pauline identifies a common link between Acholi culture and Christian spirituality. Both stress the need for reconciliation and therefore, harmony among communities. When she emphasizes forgiveness in her speech, she cites the example of Christ, whom Christians believe suffered and died on behalf of all humanity to reconcile humans to God and to one another. However, she also offers examples from the Acholi community. In 2004, a group of seventy people, including some of Kony’s “wives” and children returned to Gulu after leaving the LRA. They flew from Khartoum, Sudan and arrived at the airport in Gulu. Instead of animosity or vengeance, the returnees faced a grand celebration, with multitudes of people dancing and literally jumping for joy when they arrived. “The returnees told us later that they were so full of joy because they thought they were not going to be accepted. They said they just started weeping while they were still in the plane, watching the crowd from the windows.” Sister Pauline ensured that one of the top rebel commanders who was among the group, a man named Kenneth Banyar, carried all the returnees out of the plane: she wanted them to have that experience so they could tell the rebels still in the bush that they were treated like royalty when they returned home. The returnees were forgiven before they even had a chance to apologize.

Challenges to Reintegration

The LRA reportedly forces children to kill family members or friends in front of other children to instill fear and loyalty, causing a devastating psychological impact on children who are less likely to return to a community where they have participated in murdering and torturing their own neighbors and family members. The use of abducted children as combatants also has a devastating impact on community members, who are less likely to take up arms against the LRA if it means fighting against their own children.³¹

³¹ Catholic Relief Services, “Northern Uganda.”

Despite scenes where communities greet the returnees at the airport, conflict may still arise within their communities when the former rebels return. Community members are justifiably angry for what the returnees may have done to those communities. Sister Pauline repeatedly hears comments directed at returnees: “You killed my family and now you’re coming back to stay in the community? Why should I accept you? You’re a killer.” In this context, reintegration is a trying process, which Sister Pauline acknowledges in her sensitization speeches in the cleansing ceremonies. Further sensitization occurs during radio talk shows, which Sister Pauline participates in along with Ker Kwaro and a group of religious leaders, the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI),³² another partner of CRS. Northern Uganda is a radio culture: almost every family has one and it is common to see even young children walking around the camps or communities carrying them. During the radio shows, Sister Pauline and her colleagues address the difficulties of reintegration, but encourage their listeners to keep in perspective the long-term goals of healing the communities.

The obstacles to reintegration include the attitudes and actions of community members when former rebels return; however, there are serious psychological issues involving trauma suffered by the returnees which can hinder reintegration. Together with Ker Kwaro, Sister Pauline conducts follow-up meetings with returnees and their families or communities to ensure they are properly reintegrated. In these meetings, she wants to know if the former rebels are being accepted by their peers, if they are still suffering psychological trauma, and if they are making an attempt to engage and get involved in the community. Sister Pauline has worked with Caritas to train “caregivers” for returnees who need constant attention or more help than others. Sister Pauline follows several returnees, but there are three boys in particular who committed

³² The Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative is an inter-religious organization composed of Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox, and Muslim community leaders. Their work in dialogue and mediation is explained in depth below.

atrocities so heinous they are having an especially difficult time adjusting to life outside the bush. She must meet with these boys much more frequently than she does other returnees.

Joel

Joel sits near watering holes, faucets, or rivers, anywhere he can hear the sound of water. When Sister Pauline asks him why he sits there, he replies, “I am just enjoying the blood flowing as it did in the bush.”

He does not want to be around any strangers. He mistakes anyone he does not know for an enemy. When he sees UPDF soldiers walking around in the villages and camps, he has the urge to grab their guns and shoot them.

He returned to the community and wanted to go back to school—he was in P-7³³ when he was abducted in 2000—to take his examinations to move on to secondary school. When he is in class and the teacher gives the students exercises to do in their workbooks, he writes insults. He does not even realize it. Sometimes he faints in class. After regaining consciousness, Joel will sit still for long periods of time without talking.

Joel was abducted into the LRA at the age of twelve and escaped four years later. To initiate him and desensitize him to the violent environment he was now a part of, the rebels forced him to witness people having limbs cut off or being beaten to death; he was also made to participate in killing. In Soroti district, he and other initiates were forced to beat a group of students to death. Later, he was taken to a massacre site in Sudan—a massacre committed earlier by the LRA—and ordered to arrange the skeletons of the victims. He had to find heads, legs, arms—the limbs were all scattered around; he was made to arrange them into the normal shape

³³ According to the school system in Uganda, P-7 refers to the last year of primary school, or eighth grade in the United States.

of a human body. He lined up the bodies and then was told to sleep in between the skeletons for the night.

Joel became an escort to a top rebel commander named Tabule. While in Soroti, Tabule was fatally shot. He fell near Joel, who bent down as the commander was dying. He pleaded with Joel, "Please, don't leave my body. Carry me and take me back to Sudan." The boy was forced to carry the dead body to Sudan. The smell of the decomposing flesh often overtook him and he would faint, too weak to continue; but the other commanders would force him to his feet. It took him one week to carry the man to Sudan. "He can smell it still. It made him more and more traumatized."

He longed to escape, but feared being killed. He saw what happens to people when they try to escape; he even participated in killing others who had attempted it. Finally, in 2004, he managed to flee his group as they were moving through his home area. Joel reported to the barracks of the UPDF and from there was taken to a reception center. "He said that now that he's at home, sometimes he feels like committing atrocities. It comes in his heart from time to time. He has bad nightmares where he dreams of fighting and killing only."

Okongo

Okongo was abducted in 1996 at the age of ten. He stayed in the bush for eight years, escaping from the LRA in 2004. His initiation also involved killing a man by beating. Okongo was forced to kill by himself, rather than in a group of other recent abductees. He had to beat the man using his bare hands.

His hands were hurting and the person was not yet dead, but he was told to continue. If he stopped, he knew he would be the one to be killed. While he was beating him, the man was crying and looking at him. He beat the man until he died. I don't know how long it took, but it was hours.

Then, the rebels brought him someone else to kill. This time, because Okongo's hands were hurting, they told him he could kill by kicking or jumping on the man. Again, it was hours before the man died.

He said that now, the two people that he killed by himself, they keep on coming to him. In his dreams and even when he is just sitting alone, they come to him and say, 'Why did you kill us? Why did you kill us?' He pleads with them and says, 'I was forced to do it.'

There were other times he killed as part of a group. Okongo was a participant in a massacre at a village called Mucwini. According to Sister Pauline, over 200 people were killed in just two hours. The rebels were commanded to take babies and beat them against trees. They crushed the skulls of adults and the elderly; sometimes they chopped off their limbs and sliced their bodies using pangas. Okongo is not sure how many people he killed in Mucwini; he says it was at least ten.

In Adekokwok, Lira district, Okongo and the rebels dressed in uniforms that resembled the UPDF. The people of Adekokwok welcomed them when they arrived one evening; they all sat together, talking and laughing. As darkness came, the rebels started gathering families together and locking them in their homes. They started burning houses with entire families inside. If people tried to flee their homes as they caught fire, Okongo and the other rebels shot them, or slaughtered them using pangas. More people died in Adekokwok than the massacre in Mucwini. "In the morning, there were bodies everywhere."

On one journey back to Uganda from their base in Sudan, Okongo was able to escape. He had been in the LRA for eight years and had progressed through the ranks; he was by then a respected leader. He led a small group of rebels to go and fetch water. On their way, he announced to them that he was planning on escaping and anyone could join him. "Since he was

the leader, who would refuse?" They each took off in a different direction as the larger group that was waiting for them in vain began chasing them. He heard gunshots all around him and dropped to the grass. Okongo could see one rebel near him, calling out and coaxing him to disclose himself, "Okongo, I can see you. You better get up or I'll shoot you."

Because he could see the man, he knew he was lying, trying to convince Okongo to rise up from the grass. Instead, he lay still until the rebel gave up.

For several days he walked, trying to find a safe place. He found a school building, abandoned and covered in grass. There was a table inside on which he laid down because his legs were aching and beginning to swell. After a day, a UPDF soldier was patrolling the area and came across Okongo, hungry and dehydrated. When the soldier discovered Okongo was an abductee who escaped the LRA, he "was so good and carried him on his back to the barracks. They bathed him, treated his legs, and prepared food for him. He stayed one week in the barracks and then they took him to the reception center."

Patrick

"This was the first of its kind. Nothing like this has ever happened." In an area of Pader district, Patrick, another abductee, was part of a group instructed to kill a group of people. He cut the necks of people so the blood poured forth; he cut off legs and arms. But they didn't leave the people simply to die and then begin decomposing. The rebels, including Patrick, lit a fire and began boiling water in a pot. They placed the body parts of the dead in the pot, cooking the flesh for the newly abducted to eat. They ordered them to eat; if they refused, they were to be killed.

They cooked regular food in the bush; but, sometimes they would use other objects besides firewood to light fires. Sometimes they used human heads. Instead of three stones to

support the pot, they placed human heads on the ground. The smell of hair burning as firewood still lingers in Patrick's senses.

Patrick is now twelve years old. He escaped from the LRA in 2003, after three years in the bush.

Peace Clubs

Because of this kind of extraordinary trauma that children experience when they return from being a part of the LRA, the transition to community and, particularly, school life, is arduous. The schools in northern Uganda began experiencing constant disturbances among the student population. Students would strike over even minor concerns: if their porridge was not sweet enough, they would boycott classes. If the bread was not appetizing enough, they would burn dormitories. At athletic competitions, students would end up fighting with the opposing team. "One time they even killed a student by stoning him after an athletic event." The transition from a pervasively violent environment to structured community life is often too overwhelming a shift for the young returnees. Sister Pauline, together with her colleagues at CRS and the Justice and Peace Commission (JPC)³⁴ of Gulu, sat down to discuss the situation: "What do we do about the youth? These are the future leaders of tomorrow. How do we build a culture of peace in them?"

As a result of the meeting, CRS and the JPC developed the idea of peace clubs, wherein students could join with their peers to learn how to implement peace in their communities. To begin, Sister Pauline and her colleagues wrote letters to schools, inquiring whether teachers and administrators would be supportive of the idea. They found teachers who were willing to be

³⁴ The Justice and Peace Commission of Gulu is working on peace and justice issues in northern Uganda. There is a Justice and Peace Commission in each of the nineteen Catholic dioceses in Uganda.

trained in matters of peace: conflict management and resolution, counseling, communication, even landmine awareness.³⁵ One teacher was chosen from each school to be trained. With the help of an organization called Save the Children, Sister Pauline and CRS developed peace training manuals for the teachers.³⁶ From the training, the teachers returned to their schools to form peace committees—groups of teachers and students who would be the leaders of the peace clubs. After leaders were found, the peace clubs opened. The JPC and CRS trained the students in the same concepts they trained the teachers. Conflict resolution is often peer-conducted, and Sister Pauline notes that “now, you find the students are handling most of the problems in the schools. The strikes are reduced; they only happen maybe once a year. They have learned to live with one another amicably, not only within their schools, but with neighboring schools, and even at home. Some say that at home they are even helping their parents to handle problems.”

The peace clubs began in secondary schools in Gulu. They are found in eighteen secondary schools in Gulu, including Gulu University. The idea spread to Kitgum district, where there are now twelve peace clubs. “We [CRS and the JPC] handle only secondary school. We gave the idea of developing peace clubs in primary schools to one of the other peacebuilding NGOs. We had to divide it because it was too much work; there are so many displaced schools in town.”

Sister Pauline describes how the work of the peace clubs has developed. “Because of what the students in the peace clubs have learned, they decided to act and wanted to move out of the schools and work in the camps.” The students collect clothing, books, soaps, pens, and other

³⁵ Landmines are a major problem in northern Uganda. LRA rebels place landmines not only along roads or in the bush for use against UPDF soldiers, they also set them in communities and schools. Landmine awareness training involves knowledge of the shape of landmines and the signs of landmine placement, the effects of landmines, and disability issues as they affect the student population.

³⁶ These training manuals are also used, in varying forms, for training students in primary school and secondary school, and for use in the broader community.

materials to distribute in the impoverished IDP camps. They have also extended their work to the prisons. “They go and visit the prisoners to talk to them and pray with them, just to make them feel they are not deserted.”

According to Sister Pauline, the students are constantly involved in the conflicts between returnees and other students; as a result of their training and the fact that some returnees are now part of the peace clubs, they understand the difficulties returnees encounter when they return to school. Some former abductees returned to the bush, a sign that the children are not always attended to effectively and that the marginalization of the returnees is severe. “There are returnees who cry and stay alone, alienated from the others. So the peace clubs started paying more attention to the formerly abducted children. That started a healing process for them—it was psychologically healing for them.” One of the major objectives of the peace clubs is to involve the returnees in their activities and encourage them to be leaders in the clubs. Engagement in school and community activities helps returnees recover from their trauma.

The students in the peace clubs asked Sister Pauline and CRS if they could provide them with agricultural materials: seeds, hoes, and other tools. When she asked them for what purpose, they confided to her that some students in the schools could not pay their school fees and that others come to school without any of the materials they need (uniforms, books, pens, or pencils). They wanted to begin agricultural projects so they could sell what they grow and give the money they make to the students who need help. The project is highly successful as the students plant and harvest, sell the goods, and give the profit to students who need it in the schools. They also give part of the money to help the poor in nearby camps and communities.

In addition, peace clubs conduct sensitization activities that involve raising awareness on peace issues. A main forum for this activity is Peace Day in northern Uganda which takes place

annually. Thousands of people participate in the day, including all the peace clubs who march in parades, perform songs, and recite poems they have written on peacebuilding. The week leading up to Peace Day is filled with discussions and debates on topics of peace, as well as with other educational activities, such as trainings in conflict resolution. Previous debate topics, always chosen by the students, include “Youth Participation and Commitment in Peacebuilding and Reconciliation is a Window of Hope for Sustainable Peace in Northern Uganda” and “Peace Begins with Me.”

Exchange visits with schools in neighboring districts have become an important way of spreading the idea of peace clubs and educating students in general issues of peacebuilding. A small group of students from peace clubs in Gulu went on an exchange visit to Kabarole, in western Uganda. Together with the Kabarole students, they developed small books which delivered messages of peace and educated people on basic concepts of conflict resolution. The books have been sold in schools throughout both districts.

The books have also been placed in a peace library in Gulu. Sister Pauline and CRS provided the funds for the JPC in Gulu to build a library to supply peace clubs with books on peacebuilding, conflict transformation, and other peace topics. There is now a library in Gulu town, as well as a smaller library located in the JPC office, near the CRS office. “We don’t say that only students of the peace clubs can use the library—all students are free to study in it. The teachers are also benefiting from the library.”

So that’s what the peace clubs do and they are building a culture of peace in the young ones. From time to time, we have refresher workshops just to come together and discuss the problems we are facing, how we are conducting our activities, what the impact is in the schools. Students come with lists describing the impact that peace clubs have had in their lives. Some say that before joining the peace clubs, they used to fight, they used to insult, they were just bad. But after joining, their lives changed. Many have become leaders in the school. They

are respected by the students, by the teachers; at home they are also respected. They lead a good life.

Women Peace Committees

With approximately 1.8 million people displaced in northern Uganda because of the war, there are currently around fifty-three IDP camps in Gulu district.³⁷ The nearest camp to Gulu town is Unyama camp, with over 18,000 displaced people. Several members of Sister Pauline's immediate family are in IDP camps. The government of Uganda created the camps, justifying the concentration of large portions of the population by the security situation in the north. The existing rationale is that if in the camps, the people can be better protected by the UPDF. However, the UPDF has been accused of committing grave human rights abuses in the camps, including rape, torture, and murder. Sister Pauline knows many stories of these incidences; she also knows the UPDF habit of leaving places exposed—as they did at Sacred Heart School in 1998—when the LRA is reported in an area. The conditions of the camps themselves should be considered human rights abuses: the internally displaced are at high risk of disease and malnutrition; extreme poverty is the norm. Food is provided by the World Food Program, though not sufficient to halt malnourishment. Houses in the camps are constructed close together using mud or brick with grass-thatched roofs. If a fire breaks out in a camp, it can easily burn hundreds of houses in thirty minutes. With such extreme overcrowding, sanitation is poor.

Women who survive attempted abduction by the rebels, or who escape from the LRA, only to be put in camps in the name of the protection of civilians, “must then live through sexual exploitation. They tell the cruelty of individual and gang rapes by government soldiers, forced

³⁷ The numbers here reflect a marked increase in insecurity in the region. In March of 2002, the UPDF launched a large-scale military operation against the LRA, entitled “Operation Iron Fist.” The operation has led to several major consequences; most pertinent to the discussion here, it has led to a huge increase in the levels of the internally displaced, with more than 200 camps now in northern Uganda.

prostitution, harsh punishments, and the life of extreme deprivation” in IDP camps.³⁸ The deprivation that war brings and the lack of opportunity for employment for men often leads to alcoholism—and then to domestic violence and child abuse within the camps, further endangering the health and well-being of women. Furthermore, fathers will sometimes give their own young daughters to men, often UPDF soldiers, for sex in exchange for money. “When I would move to the camps to stay with people and just talk to them to try and give them hope, I discovered there were a lot of things happening within the camps which we needed to address.”

Sister Pauline recognized that despite their traditional Acholi roles as mothers and educators, women were not involved in peacebuilding or conflict management within the camps. She discussed the idea of including women in the task of peacebuilding with CRS; not long after, a group called People’s Voice for Peace (PVP) wrote to CRS with a similar idea. A new partnership was born. The organization’s vision “corresponded with what I was thinking: to use women in the camps to empower them to combat violence, to teach people the effects of domestic violence on families and individuals, to teach the effects of drugs and alcohol, and also to show the effects of not accepting your own child or other formerly abducted people.”

Sister Pauline and PVP produced a video entitled “Women’s Participation in Peacebuilding” to screen in the camps to educate women on the effects of violence in their communities and how they can deal with both the effects and the violence itself. After showing the video, the trainers, including Sister Pauline, discuss with the audience what they saw in the video and what it means for them in the camps, but discussion is not enough. They involve the women in drama productions that connect with concepts they viewed in the video. The trainers do not participate—it is the women in the camps who act out the scenes to reinforce the concepts

³⁸ Sister Pauline Acayo, “Northern Ugandan Girls and Women Need Help and Justice.” Testimony given at the Global Women’s Court of Accountability. Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice, University of San Diego. 17 November 2005.

in the video. After the dramatic renderings, the women dialogue about the next step: what can be done now that we understand the effects of violence? After discussion, they develop resolutions describing what they will actively do in their community to combat violence.

Women peace committees grew out of these meetings and resolutions: the women in the camps needed a way to hold each other accountable and ensure their resolutions would be followed. “It came from the women alone. We don’t impose. It was their idea.” The women included formerly abducted girls who are now essential to the functioning of the women peace committees.

The women peace committees have expanded to include a group of twenty-six formerly abducted girls—some are mothers now—who work with the committees, sharing their stories as they move from camp to camp. They testify about when and how they were abducted, their experiences in the bush, and when and how they escaped. Though the women have divergent experiences, there is a common thread that the twenty-six women highlight when they speak to the women in the camps: they were accepted by the community despite what they had done in the bush.

One girl was in the bush for ten years, abducted at the end of her studies at school when she was around sixteen-years-old. When she was abducted, she was given as a “wife” to one of the rebel commanders. She was not the only “wife” the man had. “There are four, five, sometimes ten women for one man.” She gave birth to three children while in the bush. Sexual slavery is one of the many abuses suffered by women in the LRA; this particular girl was also initiated into the group in a similar way as boys: she was forced to witness killings and to participate in them. Yet, even after ten years of LRA indoctrination, the girl, by this time an adult, was aware that there was no aim or objective to the fighting. “She thought, ‘How long am

I going to stay in the bush and fight? People are dying at home.’ She found she was wasting her time and people were dying every day.” The girl had heard constantly over the years from her commanders that she would be killed if she tried to escape and that if she did manage to escape, no one would welcome her home. “She thought God would help her not to be killed. If he didn’t help her, she still thought it was better to be killed than to stay in the bush.” Even with three small children to care for, she managed to escape. She shares her stories so that the community learns that their acceptance of her was worthwhile, that forgiveness and acceptance are essential to the end of the war. She also testifies so that others will not be afraid to share their experiences.

Sometimes the testimonies have unexpected results. On one occasion in Awer IDP camp in Gulu district, rebels were among the audience listening to the women sharing their stories.³⁹ When rebels escape from the LRA, those remaining in the bush are told that those who actually escaped were killed. It is sometimes an effective strategy to discourage rebels from fleeing. However, on this day in Awer camp, the rebels discovered that these girls were in fact not killed, but standing before them sharing stories of acceptance by their communities. They realized they were being deceived by their commanders and that it was indeed possible to escape. The women peace committees and the twenty-six girls became conduits of hope and possibility, and catalysts for the flight of the rebels from the LRA.

Volunteer Paralegals

It is not strictly the LRA who disregard the human rights of civilians in the north. Rape, torture, intimidation, illegal detention, forced prostitution—these are just a few of the human

³⁹ As is noted in previous references in the story, it is not always possible to distinguish rebels from the UPDF, or from the general population.

rights abuses committed by UPDF soldiers or Local Defense Units (LDU)⁴⁰ on both women and men in northern Uganda. As a result of these abuses, Sister Pauline and her CRS colleagues, in conjunction with the JPC of Gulu, asked Catholic leaders in their parishes to find five people per parish who were willing to work for peace. These people needed to have command of the English language, both written and conversational, and be willing to work as volunteers: there would be no payment for what they would be asked to do. It would be a labor of love.

The volunteers were found and trained in several areas related to peace and conflict resolution in northern Uganda: communication, leadership skills, how to handle domestic violence, property law (because of displacement, knowledge of property law is a valuable asset), counseling, and most importantly, human rights. They became what the JPC calls paralegals. CRS provides support, mainly transport (CRS purchased bicycles so paralegals could travel to outlying villages) and office supplies. Opening offices in the parishes, paralegals perform many duties; the most essential is their work on complaints of human rights abuses, specifically by the UPDF. Though only volunteers, the paralegals are trained by the JPC, along with the police, the Human Rights Commission of Uganda, and legal aid offices, to ensure they become well-versed on these issues.

Sister Pauline knows many stories of human rights abuses which the paralegals must learn to address. She recalls one girl who tried to report to the UPDF upon her escape from the rebels:

When she came to Uganda from Sudan, she managed to escape, but when she approached the government soldiers to surrender, she was still in her Lord's Resistance Army uniform. One soldier shot at her three times, but failed to hit her. She was beaten badly, forced to remove her uniform, tied on a tree, and kicked almost to death.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Local Defense Units are not part of the UPDF, but are volunteers from the communities who are trained and armed, yet are not paid a salary.

⁴¹ Sister Pauline Acayo, "Northern Ugandan Girls."

In another case of abuse, Sister Pauline remembers that

In 2002, I found out from returnees in the reception center that about 40 returnees had been locked up in prison by government soldiers. Nobody knew about it. They were placed in a very small room and could only stand and not sleep, not able to move from morning to morning. Around that same time, I heard that some returnees had been thrown in a hole in a place called Achol-pii, in Pader district. Most of them died there; nobody knew about it.

Human rights abuses such as these, committed by the UPDF, are reported to the volunteer paralegals who open case files to investigate the reports. Any reports that cannot be handled by the paralegals are referred to the Human Rights Commission. A recent case Sister Pauline has followed involved the beating of a young man by two UPDF soldiers in an IDP camp. The boy reported the incident to the paralegals, who then forwarded it to the police. The soldiers were arrested and are awaiting trial. However, soldiers are not always arrested; justice is not always served. Near Sister Pauline's home, a sixteen-year-old girl was raped by a government soldier. She was too weak to move; she bled for five days and fell into a coma. Sister Pauline and some of her co-workers found her and took her to the hospital. They informed the paralegals, who referred it to the JPC, who in turn referred it to the Human Rights Commission. The case was opened against the soldier who committed the crime. The UPDF transferred him before he could be tried.

Residents of the camps and communities in the north were initially hesitant to approach paralegals with the abuses they have suffered. Traditionally, the local councils and local leaders handled disputes within the community, but the leaders are increasingly corrupt and demand payment before they will listen to the complaints. Two paralegals, Vicky and Christopher, believe that people trust them now and turn to the paralegals rather than the local councils

because they do the work for free; furthermore, the paralegals represent a religious organization.⁴²

As a consequence of the accomplishments of the paralegals—gaining the trust of the communities, their knowledge of legal issues, success in handling cases and frequently bringing justice for those who have been abused—local government officials have been recruiting paralegals to work with them in the district. The JPC and CRS understand the attraction of a steady income in the employ of the government and do not prevent the paralegals from leaving their volunteer work. The challenge now for the organizations is to find the funding, time, and resources to train more and more people to become paralegals. In a recent district meeting, the organizations requested that the government train their own people rather than taking those already well-versed and working with the JPC. “It was good to discuss with [the district representatives]. Together we move our way forward.”

Not all of the volunteer paralegals accept the government jobs. Sister Pauline inquired why they would stay with the JPC, saying to one paralegal, “All this time you have been volunteering and yet, you could be doing work in the government and receiving a good salary.”

The paralegal responded, “Sister, we want to work for our own people who are suffering. Until we achieve peace, we cannot leave.”

In addition to no salary, the paralegals receive constant threats from the government because of their work on behalf of human rights. Sometimes they are abused and mistreated. “Because the paralegals are reporting the abuses and the government is targeting them, we always encourage them. It is not easy to work for peace. I like them because they are courageous and they are ready to move ahead. They give me encouragement.”

⁴² Justice and Peace Commission of Gulu, “A Day in a Paralegal’s Life,” *Justice and Peace News*, 7.6 (June 2005).

Protection Working Group

In her capacity as the sole CRS peacebuilding officer in northern Uganda, Sister Pauline must network with a multitude of other NGOs and community-based organizations that work in peacebuilding and human rights. The Protection Working Group (PWG) is one avenue of networking and collaboration. It is an umbrella organization of NGOs working in peacebuilding in Gulu, Kitgum, and Pader. In the two years since its inception, the PWG has expanded to include several NGOs concerned about peace in the north; the group is coordinated by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). The last Thursday of every month, Sister Pauline spends her day in a meeting of the PWG to discuss human rights violations and how to deal with them. If there is an unusually high number of abductions by the LRA that month, the group analyzes the situation to discover the reason for the inflation. The same discussion occurs if the number of ambushes has increased in the previous month. The group reports and discusses human rights abuses, such as rape, torture, illegal detention, and beatings, and regularly forwards them to higher authorities, such as UPDF commanders or district officials. Deterioration of the IDP camps is routinely deliberated in the meetings: lack of sanitation contributing to poor health and a high mortality rate, absence of UPDF soldiers protecting the camps, and the removal of people's land while in the camps.

The PWG documents land cases in northern Uganda. The north is a fertile area of Uganda, and therefore, a major asset to its people. With the development and expansion of IDP camps all over the north, the government removes the people from their land and, in turn, is often attempting to claim that land as the property of the government. The PWG counsels residents to report to them when the government attempts to confiscate their property. In the two years the

PWG has been working together, they have documented over 200 cases of land issues. Their work on behalf of the people brought a little bit of a problem.

The government representatives in Gulu went on the radio accusing the PWG members of telling the people to refuse when their land was trying to be removed by the government. We heard them on the radio and went and had another meeting with them. We put it plainly to them that they don't have the right to take people's land.

Just as Sister Pauline finds inspiration in the work and bravery of the paralegals, she is encouraged by the PWG members. Likewise, she tries to reciprocate the encouragement: "We are a very active group and when an issue is discussed, we immediately take action, without fear, although we may be at loggerheads with the government. We always encourage each other not to fear anything, but to stand for the truth and the poor."

In the past few years, a development in the north has occupied the PWG: the advent of night commuters. Every night in Gulu town (and in other village centers throughout the north), a visitor will find thousands of children seeking safety in the center of town. These children have been dubbed "night commuters" because they travel from their own homes, sometimes several kilometers away, trying to elude abduction by the rebels. The children, extremely vulnerable in their own small villages, are safer in town centers, which are more populated and constantly patrolled by UPDF soldiers. If fortunate enough to find rest in night commuter centers run by a handful of NGOs, the children receive food and shelter, in addition to electricity (so they can do their homework) and restrooms. The centers are not numerous enough, nor large enough to accommodate all the children. For those not registered in centers, they must sleep in bus parks, under shop verandahs, the verandah of Lacor Hospital, or anywhere they can find a little space free from harassment. The number of night commuters fluctuates depending on the security situation, but is anywhere between 20,000 and 40,000 throughout the north on any given night.

Though the town centers are relatively safer for the children, girls especially remain vulnerable to rape and abduction on their journey to town and back to the camps.

The members of the PWG visit the night commuter centers as often as possible; Sister Pauline goes at least once a month, sometimes more often if she is hosting journalists or other visitors. She wants the visitors to see for themselves the effects of the conflict. When Sister Pauline goes as a representative of the PWG, she is inspecting the centers to ensure they are accommodating the children in a safe, clean, and nurturing environment: free of mosquitoes, with proper sanitation, and educational activities provided. Sister Pauline prefers visiting the children who are not in the center “because they don’t have anywhere to sleep. They just sleep on the street or on the grass without anything to cover themselves. They just lie in the open space or under the verandah. I like being with them because at least those in the centers have people taking care of them.” Little can be done but to pray with them and share a night’s sleep under the verandah.

District Resettlement Peace Team

Sister Pauline also takes an active lead in the District Resettlement Peace Team (DRPT), a sub-committee of the District Disaster Management Committee (DDMC) in Gulu. The DDMC is composed of several sub-committees which deal with matters related to disaster and conflict, including emergency readiness, water and sanitation issues, HIV/AIDS, and agriculture. Sister Pauline’s sub-committee is concerned with resettlement, specifically as it affects the civilian population in the IDP camps. Their concerns are similar to the work of the PWG, but the DRPT is concerned with the logistics of moving large sectors of the population from their homes to camps, or from one camp to another. If there is a disaster that forces an evacuation of a camp—

for example, a fire breaks out or the security situation deteriorates—the DRPT prepares, with the full input of the population to be relocated, an assessment of the situation. The team provides the necessary logistics for the relocation, including mode of transport, security considerations, and supplies required for the move and resettlement. For the resettlement, the DRPT liaises with the UPDF and local police to provide security. They must also coordinate with NGOs to provide items to families as they move and begin to rebuild their lives.

Sister Pauline has helped to organize exchange visits with the Gulu team’s counterparts in neighboring districts, including Soroti and Lira. It is imperative for districts to work together as the war continues, especially on matters related to emergencies and disasters. “These visits are good to discuss and get ideas—and to cement the relationship.”

Justice and Peace Commission

Sister Pauline has helped to strengthen other relationships among organizations throughout Uganda. As part of the Gulu Justice and Peace Commission (JPC), the group that sponsors paralegals and peace clubs, Sister Pauline organized all the JPCs in Uganda to visit Gulu and to witness first-hand the effects of the war. “Most of them fear coming to Gulu. They hear the word ‘Gulu’ and say, ‘No, I won’t come; I don’t want to die. It’s just another northern war.’” Sister Pauline proposed the visit to CRS, who accepted and provided the funds. After much persistence, members of the commissions ventured to the north. “For many, it was their first time in Gulu.” The representatives from each commission saw with their own eyes what was taking place in their own country. After a one-week intensive meeting, the group wrote a memorandum, signed by the chairpersons of each of the nineteen Catholic dioceses in Uganda, to President Museveni urging him to do more to encourage peace talks and resolve the conflict

without continuing to resort to a military solution. Though little response came from the government, the representatives returned to their dioceses and began educating the people in their parishes about the conflict in the north; Sister Pauline believes that people are beginning to see more and more that the conflict is a concern for all Ugandans, not just northerners. Also, the commissions, CRS, and others are working with religious leaders in southern Sudan, doing cross-border advocacy to urge the Sudanese government to stop harboring the LRA in their country.⁴³

Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative

In early 1994, the government of Uganda and the LRA, with the guidance and mediation of Betty Bigombe, an Acholi and, at the time, Minister for Pacification of the North, were close to a deal to finally end the conflict in the north. The peace talks abruptly collapsed, with President Museveni making a last-minute demand and issuing an “ultimatum: if the LRA did not abandon the armed struggle in seven days, the NRA⁴⁴ would destroy it. The designation of a week as a period of surrender seemed designed to destroy the negotiations, and it did.”⁴⁵

More recently, the LRA and the government began talks, again mediated by Bigombe.⁴⁶ The Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI), “has been working hand-in-hand with Betty Bigombe, with the district people, and with those who are working for peace.” As a leader in the Catholic community, Sister Pauline is part of the ARLPI. As the Peacebuilding Officer in

⁴³ The LRA has bases in southern Sudan. Prior to the 2005 peace accord in Sudan, the government of Sudan supported the LRA, while Museveni supported the Sudanese People’s Liberation Army, which was fighting the Sudanese government. With the peace agreement early in 2005, the government of Sudan is required to stop supporting the LRA. They have allowed the UPDF to pursue the LRA on Sudanese soil. It is widely acknowledged that Kony operates largely from outside the southern town of Juba.

⁴⁴ The NRA was still the government army at this point. The name was changed to the UPDF in September of 1995 with the signing of the Constitution.

⁴⁵ Gersony, “Anguish of Northern Uganda.”

⁴⁶ These peace talks began in March of 2004, but collapsed in December of that same year. Bigombe and the ARLPI are reportedly still in talks with both the LRA and the government.

CRS, she provides organizational and financial support to the initiative. Commanders of the LRA regularly contact the ARLPI for meetings; the religious leaders sometimes convey messages between the LRA and the government despite the dangers they face. On occasion, the religious delegates are targeted as they attend meetings with rebels in the bush; it is the UPDF who cause the most disturbances, not allowing the mediators through roadblocks and prohibiting safe passage for the leaders.

In the late 1990s, the ARLPI was instrumental in lobbying for the passage of the Amnesty Act of 2000. The group firmly holds that a military solution to the conflict is not feasible—or wanted. They believe that for full reconciliation in the Acholi community, laws like the Amnesty Act must be implemented and supported by the government. Sister Pauline, as part of the ARLPI, affirms these ideas; however, she acknowledges the surrender of top rebel commanders can, at times, be detrimental to the peace process. Sam Kolo, an LRA spokesperson and one of Kony's top commanders, left the bush at the urging of the ARLPI in February of 2005. "Up to today the rebels have not replaced him with anyone. That has made the mediation and negotiation process very difficult" because now communication must be handled directly through Kony or his deputy commander, Vincent Otti. Still, Sister Pauline and the religious leaders in ARLPI consider amnesty and reintegration the ultimate modes for resolving the conflict.

As advocates of amnesty and administrators of traditional, cultural modes of reconciliation (i.e., the "Stepping of the Egg" ceremony), the ARLPI and Sister Pauline were initially resistant to the intervention of the International Criminal Court (ICC). President Museveni asked the ICC to investigate the LRA and consider the war in northern Uganda as its

first case.⁴⁷ In October of 2005, the court announced its first arrest warrants for five LRA leaders: Kony, Otti, Okot Odiambo, Dominic Ongwen, and Raska Lukwiya. Bigombe and the ARLPI, among others, voiced their concerns over how the warrants would affect the peace process. The question was also raised as to why only the LRA was being held accountable; the UPDF continues to commit violations of human rights on the civilian population of the north, yet the ICC has not issued arrest warrants for any UPDF leaders or soldiers. Sister Pauline first viewed the ICC arrest warrants and the Amnesty Act as “contradictory issues,” though she, along with Bigombe and the ARLPI, are now exploring ways in which the approaches can work in concert, rather than remaining mutually exclusive. Through the ARLPI radio shows, which air three times a month, the hosts, including Sister Pauline, explain to the rebels that the ICC warrants affect only those top five commanders; amnesty is still available to the others. Yet, there is no denying the warrants have complicated the peace process. Immediately after the indictments were unsealed, the LRA went on the offensive, increasing their attacks against civilians, even killing NGO workers. As attacks increase; as impunity remains when the UPDF commits abuses; as more children are abducted; as more civilians are killed or displaced; as women still suffer rape, forced pregnancy, and domestic violence; as people continue to die from poor sanitation in IDP camps; and as former rebels return to little opportunity in their communities, Sister Pauline recalls President Museveni’s ill-timed counsel to the ARLPI, “You just have to pray. You religious leaders should not enter politics.” Sister Pauline responds to this mind-set with a call for truth: “We are citizens of Uganda. We have the right to talk about what

⁴⁷ The International Criminal Court was established by the Rome Statute of 1998; the Statute went into effect in July of 2002 after sixty states ratified it. At the request of the government of Uganda, the ICC began investigating alleged crimes of the LRA in 2004 for crimes committed after July 1, 2002 (when the Statute establishing the court went into effect).

is not right in the country. Our duty is to push our voice, the voice of the community and its suffering.”

The Work Continues

God . . . reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us.⁴⁸

In this conflict that can divide child against family, brother against sister, even a community against itself, Sister Pauline is a nurturer of unity and humanity. The war has lasted almost twenty years, and though the statistics continue to appear grim and disheartening, Sister Pauline, as a representative of the Catholic Church and the Little Sisters of Mary Immaculate of Gulu, as a citizen of Uganda, and as a peacebuilder, constantly advocates for forgiveness of the perpetrators and reconciliation in the north. Consequently, she rejects the polarized thinking of the major players in this war: the government habitually portrays the LRA as terrorists while the LRA, in turn, vilifies and demonizes government soldiers. After she tells of a rape committed by a UPDF soldier, she is quick to point out a story involving the good deeds of other soldiers, soldiers who carry escapees from the LRA for miles to safety, or who join with Sister Pauline and the organizations she works with in helping to solve societal problems in the north. Though the LRA has committed almost unimaginable atrocities against civilians, she never forgets that the majority of the rebels either were abducted when they were children or they are newly abducted children coerced into these acts.

Sister Pauline also communicates with a wide range of groups in the north in order to promote and exemplify reconciliation. Apart from networking with other NGOs and partner

⁴⁸ II Corinthians 5.16-20. New Revised Standard Version.

organizations, she regularly talks to the government soldiers and the rebels who have returned. “In the PWG, we have a representative of the UPDF. In the DRPT, we have a representative of the UPDF. Of course, many times I have casual conversations with them.” Some of the UPDF soldiers are educated and trained in human rights by the paralegals who work with Sister Pauline. Many are “working hand-in-hand with us,” helping the paralegals bring court cases against the soldiers who commit human rights abuses. As part of the ARLPI encouraging dialogue with the rebels, Sister Pauline converses with recently returned rebels. She visited a top rebel commander, Acelam, who returned from the bush and was in the hospital recovering from gunshot wounds in the arm and leg. As she does with all the returnees she talks to, she asked him about Kony, about life in the bush, and his reasons for wanting to leave the bush. Almost without fail, the returnees express remorse for what they have done; Acelam was no exception. He was grateful to the UPDF soldiers who restrained from killing him and took him by helicopter to the barracks and then to the hospital for treatment. Sister Pauline is emboldened by encounters like these, whether discussions with former rebels or casual conversations with UPDF soldiers, in which the seeds of reconciliation are planted. “Whatever I do may not yield fruit today, but I know in the future it will.”

Apart from the work Sister Pauline accomplishes on a community level—the rehabilitation and reintegration of former rebels, the disclosure of human rights abuses, her work in the IDP camps, the involvement of women and youth in issues of peace and justice—she considers her work in her smaller communities (she often refers to them as “families”) of CRS and the Sisters in the convent to be just as essential to building peace: “Charity begins from home.” Sister Pauline initiated a bi-weekly ritual for CRS staff called Justice Reflection. Every

two weeks, a staff member is responsible for choosing one of the CRS guiding principles,⁴⁹ for instance, “good stewardship” or “the common good,” and preparing a reflection on the topic for the entire group. Through these reflections, the guiding principles are examined and reinforced; Sister Pauline sees the principles being practiced in the lives of the staff members. “In our evaluations, the staff members say it is helping them a lot, even in their families and neighborhoods.”

When Sister Pauline discusses her community of Little Sisters, she includes the school where the other Sisters teach, Sacred Heart; a new school in Gulu town for those who have been affected by landmines; and the orphans that the Sisters raise in the convent. Because of the large population of people left disabled by landmines, the Sisters decided to open a school where people can learn new trades and skills that can generate income. At the convent, the Sisters have also taken in a number of girls; in most cases they have been orphaned because their parents died either from HIV/AIDS or as victims of the war. “We take them as our own. Whatever we have, they have. We treat them as parents treat their children.” They range in age from nursery school to secondary school and have their own wing of the compound to sleep in. Some girls have been with the Sisters most of their lives: one was taken in when she was three and is now in her last year of secondary school. As in traditional families, the children learn to do chores and help with the general upkeep of the compound; the Sisters act as parents and discipline the girls when they misbehave. With her work at CRS and her networks with other organizations, with her own relatives, and with her community of Sisters along with the orphans and students, Sister Pauline creates and cultivates a sense of family.

⁴⁹ The guiding principles of Catholic Relief Services can be found at www.crs.org/about_us/who_we_are/what_we_believe.cfm. They are based on Christian scripture and Catholic social teaching.

She has encountered the rebels numerous times and witnesses constantly the destruction of northern Uganda and its civilians; she watches as UPDF soldiers often commit human rights abuses, again against civilians; she has suffered with her family as brothers have been abducted and killed while the rest of her family has been displaced in camps; yet, she refuses to be resigned to the suffering in the north. “If you lose faith, that is the end of you.” She has faith that the situation can change and that reconciliation is indeed possible. Though she approaches her own role in bringing peace to northern Uganda with modesty—“If I die, another Sister can do what I’ve been doing”—she undoubtedly feels a sense of purpose. Sister Pauline finds it providential that despite her encounters with the rebels and other events where she could have lost her life, she has survived. “When I reflect on all those things, I see that God has wanted me to work for him. When I see God’s protection, I realize that maybe I have not yet done enough. I still need to do more.”

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