

Pope pleads with Rwandans to stop violence

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — Pope John Paul II pleaded with the people of Rwanda to stop a "catastrophic wave" of ethnic and political violence that reportedly left tens of thousands killed or wounded.

The pope also urged the international community to take any action necessary to stem the bloodletting in the densely populated nation on the eastern edge of Central Africa. Among those slain in the capital city of Kigali were eight priests and nine Catholic Tutsi women, whom the pope called "innocent victims of an absurd hatred."

At a Mass April 10 to open the African Synod of Bishops, the pope appealed to all Rwandans: "Stop these acts of violence! Stop these tragedies! Stop these fratricidal massacres!"

He added later at an Angelus blessing: "In the name of Christ, I beg you, put down your weapons!"

Because of the fighting, Rwandan bishops were not at the synod's opening. Reports from Rwanda said hospitals were overflowing with dead and wounded, and death squads continued to engage in indiscriminate killing and selective assassination.

The pope said the tragic news from Rwanda had "provoked great suffering among us all."

"It is an unspeakable drama: the assassinations of the presidents of Rwanda and Burundi; the massacre of the head of the Rwanda government and her family; the killing of priests and men and women religious," he said.

International leaders should try to help in "any way that may be able to curb all this destruction and death," he said. The day before the pope made the remarks, France began airlifting troops to the Rwandan capital.

Earlier, the pope called for an end to conflict and vengeance after a plane carrying Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana and Burundi President Cyprien Ntaryamira was downed by rockets April 6. Both men were Hutu, the majority ethnic group in their countries. There is a long history of suspicion and hatred between the Hutu and the Tutsi minority — which comprises 9 percent of the population.

In a message to the country's bishops April 9, the pope said he and the whole

church were praying for the country's population. He urged the bishops to stay close to their people and help restore hope to the entire nation.

He implored Rwandan Catholics not to give in to sentiments of hatred and reprisal.

"In this tragic phase of your country's history, may you all be builders of love and peace!" he said.

Rwandan bishops said they were shocked at the extent of the bloodshed in their country and at the spirit of vengeance behind the acts of violence.

In a statement released at the Vatican April 11, the bishops reminded their faithful of the commandment "Thou Shalt Not Kill" and said offenders will answer to God for their actions.

The bishops described a horrible scene following several days of killing.

"The streets are strewn with corpses, and others are rotting in homes or hospitals. We have had the dreadful pain of counting among them many priests and religious," they said.

"One has even witnessed murderers follow those fleeing into churches and religious communities in order to massacre them," they said.

The bishops urged the country's authorities to neutralize the perpetrators of violence and called on the army to protect people of all ethnic groups. National security eventually depends upon a negotiated settlement between the government and the rebel group, the Rwandese Patriotic Front, they said.

Jesuit officials reported that 19 people, including three Jesuits and five diocesan priests, were murdered at the Jesuit-run Christ Spiritual Center in Kigali April 7.

The victims, all Rwandan, also included nine young women belonging to a secular institute, on retreat at the center; the center's cook; and a social worker who had apparently taken refuge at the center.

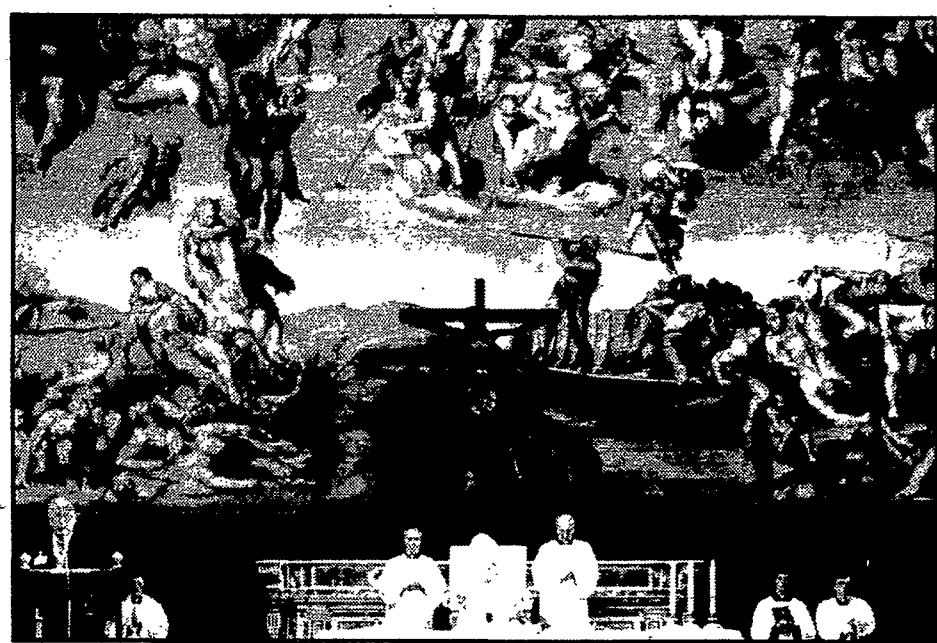
The victims all belonged to the Tutsi tribe. A statement from the U.S. Jesuit Conference in Washington said the attack apparently was perpetrated by the Rwandan presidential guard.

The Jesuit statement said at least seven Europeans, including three Belgian Jesuits, were separated from the Rwandans and locked in the dining room. In the afternoon, the Europeans were released to discover the 19 bodies in a small room far from the dining room.

The statement said it was possible the center was targeted because of its work for national reconciliation and assistance to refugees during recent years.

In Baltimore, Pat Johns, director of the Africa office for Catholic Relief Services, said all the Americans had been evacuated from Rwanda and were safe in Nairobi, Kenya. Johns said April 11 the immediate concern was for the approximately 30 Rwandan staff, most of whom did not have telephones. The only staffer they had been able to contact was in a hospital after having been badly beaten, he said.

"We will definitely go back in" once security permits it, said Johns, who noted that CRS had been working in Rwanda since 1963. CRS is the U.S. bishops' overseas relief and development agency.



AP/Wide World Photos

Curtain's up on fresco

After four years of painstaking restoration, the curtain went up on Michelangelo's 'Last Judgment' fresco in the Sistine Chapel, revealing an awesome scene of fresh colors and human figures. At an April 8 Mass to unveil the restored masterwork, Pope John Paul II said the cleaning had revived a painting of 'unequaled beauty.'

Blackmun leaves legacy of Roe decision

By Patricia Zapor
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — Retiring Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun wrote a number of significant opinions during his years on the court, covering tax law, advertising by attorneys, parental rights and even baseball, but it is *Roe vs. Wade* that is his legacy on the court.

Blackmun, 85, who announced April 6 he would retire at the end of the current term in June, wrote the opinion in the decision that legalized abortion

during his first few years on the court.

Appointed by President Nixon in 1970, Blackmun is the most senior as well as the eldest member of the court and he had been hinting for several years that he wished to retire soon.

The 1973 *Roe vs. Wade* opinion, which legalized abortion, has generated more than 20 years worth of judicial and legislative adaptation, in addition to vehement and sometimes violent debates and protests.

Each year on the anniversary of *Roe*, tens of thousands of abortion foes march in protest from the White House to the Supreme Court.

Blackmun said he has received hate mail on the subject continually since 1973 — more than 60,000 pieces in all. In 1983 at the 10th anniversary of *Roe*,

Blackmun said he realized he'd be known for the ruling to his grave and that he was a bit annoyed at the characterization of *Roe* as his.

"It was a decision of the court, not my decision," he said in a 1983 Associated Press interview. "There were seven votes."

Blackmun's retirement gives President Clinton his second opportunity to appoint a member of the court. His first appointee, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, joined the court for the beginning of the current term last October.

Within hours of news about Blackmun's retirement, organizations opposed to abortion were issuing statements about the long-term effects of the *Roe* opinion and the likelihood that any Clinton nominee to the court also would support legalized abortion.

"This is an important opportunity for President Clinton to step forward and put into practice what he has been preaching," said a statement from Jay Alan Sekulow, chief counsel for the American Center for Law and Justice, a legal firm founded by religious broadcaster Pat Robertson.

"The president has spent a good deal of time talking about his concern for the family and the need to protect religious freedom in this country," said Sekulow, who has represented abortion opponents in several cases heard by the Supreme Court. "He can show his concern by appointing someone who embodies a passion to defend the religious and civil rights of all Americans — including those who are unborn."

Clinton has said his nominees would support the constitutional right to privacy which underpins the *Roe* ruling.

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