

Terror survivor seeks to forgive

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

GREECE — God's will, Father John Kiongo believes, is what has allowed him to survive a horrific terrorist bombing.

And in the five years since, it's the ongoing example of Christ on the cross that has spared the 56-year-old priest a spiritual death.

"My consolation is only the words of Jesus — 'Forgive them, for they do not know what they're doing.' That's the only thing," said Father Kiongo, a Kenyan priest who is spending one year assisting at Greece's St. Charles Borromeo Parish.

Prior to 1998, Father Kiongo had never been challenged to practice forgiveness in the way he now must — forgiveness toward terrorists who took the lives of his brother and niece, and nearly his own life as well.

Exactly five years ago, on Aug. 7, Father Kiongo went to the United States Embassy in Nairobi to meet his brother, who worked in the shipping department, and his brother's daughter, who was leaving shortly to study in the U.S. Father Kiongo was dropping off money that had been raised to support his niece's trip.

"My brother was a great man, a very jolly man who would come and make everybody happy," Father Kiongo commented during a recent interview. "My niece was a model for our family. She was so good."

Not long after they met, a loud blast caused them all to rush to the window. Fearing correctly that an attack on the embassy was taking place, Father Kiongo sat down and put his face in his hands in prayer.

Seconds later, an even bigger explosion rocked the facility. By moving away from the window and protecting his face, Father Kiongo likely saved his life.

His brother and niece were not so fortunate.

"I could hear cries and shouts. The memory is like a dream," Father Kiongo said. He recalls hearing people say "Leave the dead and take who's alive," which is how he knew his brother and niece had perished.

Father Kiongo was the only sur-



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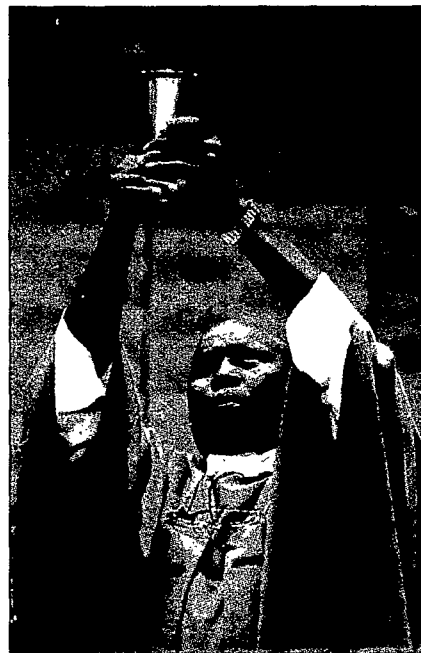
Father John Kiongo, a priest of the Archdiocese of Nairobi, Kenya, sits during Mass July 27 at Greece's St. Charles Borromeo Parish. Father Kiongo, who is assisting at St. Charles for one year, was severely injured during an Aug. 7, 1998, terrorist attack on the United States Embassy in Kenya.

vivor out of nine people in that part of the embassy. His brother, Joseph Kamau Kiongo, 53, and niece, Teresa Wairimu, 28, were among more than 200 people who died that day in the attack that rocked the embassy and a nearby office building. More than 5,000 people were injured — including Father Kiongo, who spent four months in the hospital, was temporarily blinded and nearly had an arm amputated.

Also that day, a bombing at the U.S. Embassy in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, killed 11 people. Whereas the date of Sept. 11, 2001, lives in infamy for people in the United States, it is Aug. 7, 1998, that holds similarly bitter memories for those in eastern Africa.

In October 2001 four men, believed to be a part of Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda network, were sentenced by a U.S. federal court to life in prison without parole for their roles in the two embassy bombings. Father Kiongo served as a witness in that trial, making his first-ever visit to this country in March 2001 to testify in New York City — just a few months before the Sept. 11 attacks, also linked to al Qaeda, would occur in that city as well as Washington, D.C., and western Pennsylvania.

Father Kiongo is now back in New York state, under much more pleasant circumstances: in June he came to the Diocese of Rochester to begin his stay at St. Charles Borromeo Parish. A priest since 1977, he's on sabbatical from his pastorate at All Saints Parish in Riara, in the Archdiocese of Nairobi. Describing the



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Father Kiongo performs the consecration during Mass.

St. Charles Borromeo community as "very encouraging, very supportive," Father Kiongo routinely smiles and laughs while greeting parishioners after Masses. Yet on his first weekend at St. Charles, Father Kiongo, speaking in broken yet clear English, soberly related the bombing experience in detail during his homilies.

"I have no fear talking about it, the dark side. You free yourself by talking about it," he remarked.

Father Kiongo still carries massive scars on his upper right arm, and has only limited use of his hands.

But that's far better than the prospect Father Kiongo was facing soon after the bombing, when glass and other debris was lodged in his body and he lost sight for several days. It was during this time, he said, that he delved deep into his faith and accepted the outcome that laid ahead, good or bad.

"We have to accept God's will; it is important to accept God's will. That gives me a lot of peace," he said.

Yet not surprisingly, Father Kiongo has often been troubled by memories, such as those that surfaced as he watched live news coverage of the Sept. 11 attacks. "I can tell you I was very down, very low. I didn't want to hear about it," he said.

Father Kiongo has also wondered, at times, why he was spared in the 1998 bombing when so many others weren't. He has concluded that by having endured these trials, he is meant to serve as an instrument of God's peace. "I'm in a better position to give a sign of hope when people are disturbed or discouraged ... I would like to be angry, but I have to deliver that message," he said.

Though he has cast that anger aside, Father Kiongo admits he is still perplexed by the concept of terrorism and its deadly effect on innocent victims.

"I don't know why people have to go on a killing spree. What are they looking for, really? I feel very sad. I don't feel revenge, but feel sorry for people," he said. "God has given people free will, and if they want to choose the evil side, that is a problem."

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• The 2003 Pr Community Awar ed Tiffany Bryan state-level certifi for her volunteer who attends Our High School, has