

Sudanese man asks for prayers, peace

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

ROCHESTER — St. Francis of Assisi is renowned for his pursuit of peace. Yet on the weekend acknowledging the saint's feast day, Awak Malith talked of a land where peace has been a rare commodity for the last half-century.

The 26-year-old Malith left his native Sudan some 17 years ago, forced out by a bitter ethnic civil war. Several of Malith's friends and family members died in the conflict, including his grandfather.

"That was terrible for me," he said.

Malith has gone on to make a good life for himself, but the fighting in Sudan continues. He shared his concerns as guest speaker at the 10:30 a.m. and 7 p.m. Masses Oct. 3 at the University of Rochester's Interfaith Center.

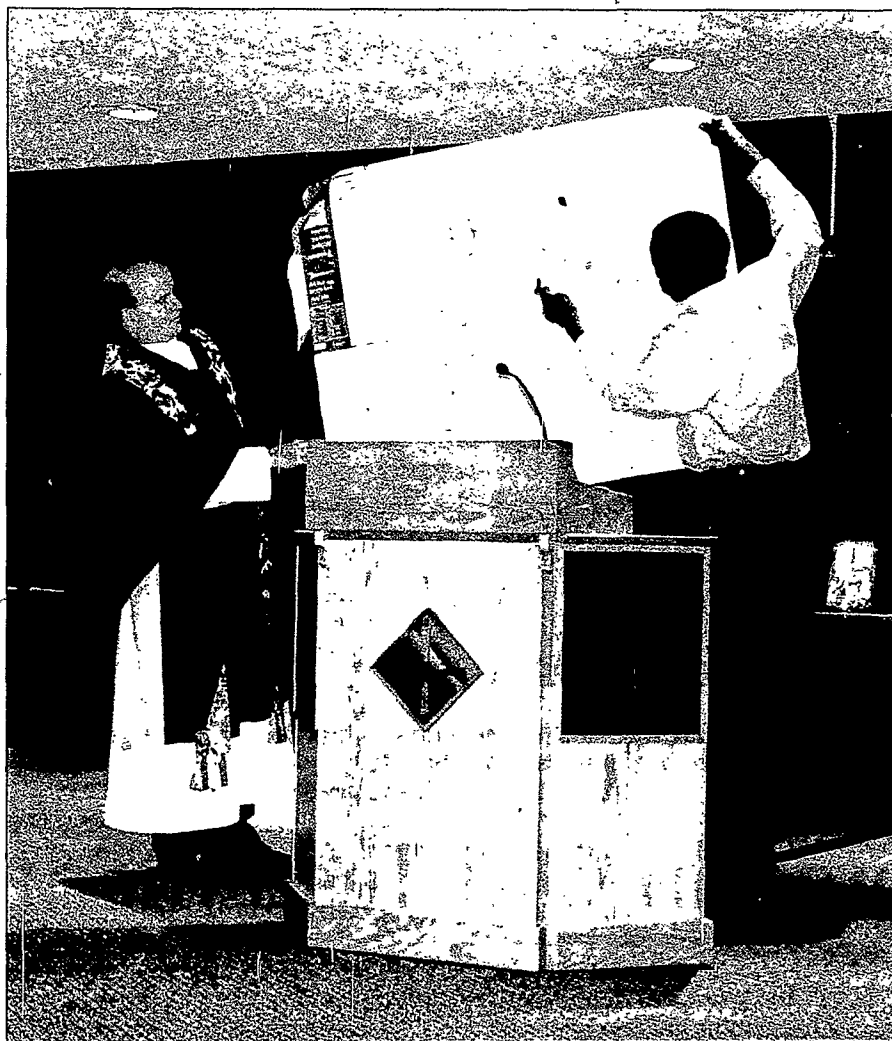
"People are dying — children dying, women being raped. People like me only wonder when will it end — so much suffering," said Malith, a first-year transfer student at the university.

Sudan, located in northern Africa, has been embroiled in civil war going back to the mid-1950s due to fighting between Arab Muslims in the north and Sudan's black southern inhabitants, many of whom are animists — believers in the existence of spirits — and Christians. The Arabs have sought to force their beliefs upon the native Sudanese, resulting in widespread violence, slavery, famine and family displacement. An estimated 2 million people have died in the fighting since 1983.

Malith asked congregants at the 10:30 a.m. Mass to pray for peace and support the United States' intervention efforts in Sudan, and to publicly spread those sentiments. Meanwhile, Father Brian Cool, who celebrated the liturgy, emphasized the overall need to "live in harmony with one another, not just those you sit next to."

Malith is a native of southern Sudan. He recalls as a young boy seeing "people on horseback coming to take villages at night, burning houses." He fled in 1987: "We were always running," said Malith, who speaks clear English with a noticeable accent from his native language of Dinka.

Over the next 15 years Malith resided mostly at refugee camps in



Colleen White/Catholic Courier

Awak Malith (right), a refugee from Sudan, explains the different regions of his country to Father Brian Cool (left) and parishioners at the University of Rochester Interfaith Chapel Oct. 3. Malith left Sudan in 1987 and came to the U.S. as a refugee in 2002.

Ethiopia and Kenya, returning only briefly to live in Sudan in the early 1990s. A Catholic who attended seminary as a high-schooler in Kenya, Malith said his faith remains a large part of his life.

He came to the United States in 2002, as part of a resettlement effort by the federal government, and attended Monroe Community College before transferring to the U of R this fall.

Meanwhile, Malith's mother remains at a refugee camp in Kenya. Malith expressed a desire to someday reunite with his family and also return to his homeland, "but I don't know how dangerous it would be."

He would like to return when fighting dies down, but remarked, "That's not going to happen in Sudan any time soon." Indeed, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell recently declared

that violence inflicted by Arab militias upon residents of Darfur — located in Sudan's western region — appears to constitute genocide.

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Malith does not give high marks to the current regime in Sudan. "Governments are supposed to protect the people ... (but) Sudan is run by people who do not care for life," he said.

He is thankful for the U.S. support that allowed him to come here, as well as the Sudan Peace Act, signed by President George W. Bush in late 2002 that increased economic and diplomatic support for the Sudanese.

"I want to live in a country where I'm appreciated. There's definitely no country better than this," he said.

Malith, a junior physics major at the University of Rochester, called the campus on which he lives "beautiful." He plans to continue his activist efforts regarding the conflict in Sudan; in fact, Father Cool — who serves as director of U of R's Newman Catholic Community — said he learned about Malith after he spoke at a Sudanese awareness day this past summer at Rochester's Cobbs Hill Park.

Malith said that after obtaining his bachelor's degree at the U of R, he hopes to pursue a master's in physics or possibly attend law school.

"I stand here because of the help of people like you," he said during the 10:30 a.m. Mass Oct. 3. "I am happy, an example of what people can achieve."

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