

THE STORY OF THE UGANDA MARTYRS: FAITH FORGED IN FIRE

As third-year Theology seminarians at Holy Family National Major Seminary-Mwendakulima Seminary, we embarked on a transformative pilgrimage to Uganda from 11th to 14th February, walking in the very footsteps of the 45 Uganda Martyrs: 22 Catholics and 23 Anglicans, whose story of faith began at Munyonyo, where the first drops of blood were spilled by King Mwanga II under the influence of deceptive diviners, and culminated in the fiery deaths at Namugongo after a harrowing death march.

In the late 19th century, the kingdom of Buganda, located in modern-day Uganda, was a vibrant and complex society at a crossroads. At its heart was the court of the Kabaka (King). It was here, in the 1880s, that a new faith, Christianity, had taken root, brought by Catholic White Father, Rev. Fr. Simeon Lourdel and Bro. Amans and Anglican missionaries. Among the pages and chiefs of the court, many converted, learning to read and write and embracing the new religion alongside their Muslim and traditional beliefs. The king at this time was Kabaka Mwanga II, a young and increasingly paranoid ruler who felt his authority slipping away.

The Spark at Munyonyo

The tragic story you speak of begins at the royal residence of Munyonyo, a beautiful lakeshore location. By 1886, Mwanga was facing immense pressure. Foreign powers were encroaching, and he felt challenged by the growing influence of the Christian pages, young men who served in his court. These young Christians, following the teachings they received from the European missionaries, refused to participate in certain traditional practices and rituals that Mwanga demanded, including acts he considered degrading. Their loyalty, he feared, was shifting from him to a foreign God.

Seeking an explanation for his troubles, Mwanga turned to the traditional diviners and witch doctors. These cunning advisors saw the Christians as a threat to the old order. They planted a poisonous seed in the king's mind, convincing him that the new Christian faith was the source of misfortune and "nuksi" (a curse) upon his kingdom. They told him that the Christians, by following the teachings of the white man, were practicing sorcery and plotting against him. The king, already fearful and suspicious, was easily persuaded.

The First Blood and the Judgement Tree

The persecution began swiftly and brutally. Mwanga, now convinced he was cleansing his kingdom, started passing death sentences. The first judgment was pronounced under a large, iconic tree at Munyonyo a tree that would become known as the “Muwafu Tree,” a silent witness to the beginning of the horror.

The very first martyrdoms took place within the confines of the royal enclosure at Munyonyo. One of the first to die was Denis Ssebuggwawo, a young Catholic page and teacher. When Mwanga discovered Denis was following Christian instructions from the white man, the king flew into a rage. He seized a spear and, in a fit of fury, killed Denis himself. He was the first to be killed personally by the king.

Immediately following Denis’s death, Mwanga ordered his prime minister to deal with another Christian. Andrew Kaggwa, a respected military commander and a Catholic convert, was summoned. Knowing his fate was sealed, Andrew paused to pray before leaving. He was seized, taken outside the palace gates, and brutally hacked to death. The blood of the martyrs had begun to flow, staining the very soil of Munyonyo.

The Death March to Namugongo

The killings at Munyonyo were just the beginning. Mwanga resolved to eliminate this ‘threat’ once and for all. He ordered a mass execution of all the Christians who refused to renounce their faith. Over 30 young men, mostly pages and officials from the court, were condemned.

They were tied together and forced to begin a grueling, 37-mile (about 60 km) journey from Munyonyo to the official place of execution at Namugongo. Namugongo was the traditional execution ground for the kingdom, a place reserved for those condemned for serious crimes against the Kabaka. The journey itself was a trial. Some, like Akileo Kiwanuka, were too weak to keep up. Akileo was killed along the roadside when he could no longer walk. Another, Saint Mbaga Tuzinde, was so crippled he had to be carried by his companions. When his carrier grew tired and dropped him, he was killed by the king’s men on the spot. The road to Namugongo was thus marked with the blood and bodies of the faithful.

The Inferno at Namugongo

On June 3, 1886, the remaining prisoners arrived at Namugongo. The atmosphere was one of terror, yet among the young men, a remarkable spirit of courage and faith prevailed. Led by the chief of the royal pages, Charles Lwanga (who had baptized several of them secretly just days before), they prayed and sang hymns, preparing to meet their God.

At Namugongo, the execution was designed to be a slow, agonizing death by fire. The martyrs were wrapped in reed mats, placed on a large pyre, and burned alive. To prolong their suffering and maximize the terror, the pyre was lit from below, so the flames would creep slowly upwards.

The accounts of their deaths are awe-inspiring. As the fire began to consume them, they did not cry out in pain but continued to pray and encourage one other. One of the most famous stories is of Saint Kizito, the youngest of the martyrs, who was only about 14 years old. He was seen laughing joyfully as he was thrown into the flames. When asked why he was laughing, he replied that he was happy to be going to heaven.

The Legacy

In total, 45 Ugandans were killed for their faith between 1885 and 1887: 22 Catholics and 23 Anglicans. They came from different backgrounds: pages, soldiers, royal officials, and craftsmen. Denis Ssebuggwawo and Andrew Kaggwa are honored as the first to fall. Charles Lwanga, who took over the spiritual leadership of the group after the earlier death of Joseph Mukasa, is perhaps the most renowned among them.

Their courage did not have the effect Mwanga II intended. Rather than extinguishing Christianity, their blood became the seed of the Church. Their heroic deaths inspired countless others to convert. The site of their execution at Namugongo is now one of the holiest places in Africa, home to both the Catholic and Anglican shrines.

In 1964, Pope Paul VI canonized the 22 Catholic martyrs (Karol Lwanga, Matia Mulumba, Joseph Mukasa Balikuddembe, Dionsyio Ssebuggwawo, Pontiano Ngondwe, Andrea Kaggwa, Atanasio Bazzekuketta, Gonzaga Gonza, Noa Mawaggali, Luka Banabakintu, Yakobo Buzabalyawo, Gyavira, Ambrozio Kibuka, Anatoli Kiriggwajjo, Akileo Kiwanuka, Kizito, Mbaga Tuzinde, Mugagga, Mukasa Kiriwawavu, Adulfu Mukasa Ludigo, Bruno Sserunkuma and Yoanna Maria

Muzeyi), and they are venerated as saints by the Catholic Church. The Anglican Communion also honors their 23 martyrs as heroes of the faith. Every year on June 3rd, thousands of pilgrims from across Africa and the world gather at Namugongo to honor their memory, celebrating their unwavering faith, their unity, and their ultimate sacrifice for a God they loved more than life itself.

SPIRITUAL IMPACTS FOR US

For us, standing on that sacred soil where these martyrs were killed, the spiritual impacts were profound and unifying: we encountered the raw cost of discipleship, realizing that our future priesthood demands a courage that must be stronger than the fear of death; we saw in Charles Lwanga a model of pastoral charity, a spiritual father who shepherded his flock even unto the flames, inspiring us to embrace obedience and moral integrity as a total consecration to God; we felt the deep ache for ecumenical unity as we moved between the Catholic shrines, their mixed blood in the soil preaching a sermon on our shared faith that no human division can erase; and we drew from their example a supernatural fortitude that transforms fear into joy, just as the young Kizito laughed on his way to the pyre. Ultimately, travelling from Munyonyo to Namugongo renewed our love for the sacraments we will one day administer, reminding us that Baptism and the Eucharist are not mere rituals but the very power that sustained these ordinary young men in their ordinary duties. This is a powerful reminder for us that holiness is not just for the future, once we are ordained. We are called to be saints now, in the ordinary moments of seminary life: in prayers, in our studies, in sports, and our interactions with brothers. It teaches us that the path to priesthood is a path of daily, humble fidelity.

In short, a pilgrimage to the Uganda Martyrs' sites leaves us forever changed. It plants a seed of heroic faith in our heart, a seed we are meant to nurture throughout our formation and carry with us into our priesthood. We return not just with a story to tell, but with a fire in our soul, the same fire that consumed their bodies but could never touch their faith.

BELOW: PICTURES OF THE MUNYONYO MINOR BASILICA ON THE RIGHT AND ST. ANDREW KAGGWA'S STATUE ON THE LEFT.



BELOW: PICTURES OF DIVINE MERCY ADORATION CHAPEL AT MUNYONYO



BELOW: PICTURES OF MUWAFU TREE AND THE PLACE WHERE ST. CHARLES LWANGA BAPTIZED HIS FELLOW A NIGHT BEFORE THEIR MARTYDOM



BELOW: THE WATER IN THE LAKE AND FROM THE TAP HAS ITS SOURCE FROM THE FOUNT WHICH IS UNDER THE TABERNACLE IN THE MINOR BASSILICA



BELOW: PICTURES SHOWING DIFFERENT OCCASIONS AND SCENES OF NAMUGONGO PILGRIMAGE CENTER. STARTING FROM THE RIGHT IS THE OUTWARD VIEW OF NAMUGONGO BASILICA FOLLOWED BY INSIDE VIEW OF THE BASILICA AND LASTLY THE NAMUGONGO POOL



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