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Peace Bishops: Ugandan Catholic Archbishop John Baptist Odama

John Ashworth*

Archbishop John Baptist Odama of the Archdiocese of Gulu is widely known for his courageous efforts to bring an end to the Lord's Resistance Army conflict in northern Uganda through the interfaith Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative, and increasingly for his participation in the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative and his willingness to share his experience with others. This essay explores not only these aspects of his life, but also earlier influences and experiences of ministry which helped to form him as a "peace bishop" who values the life and dignity of a human being above everything.

Keywords: peacebuilding, Uganda, Peace Bishop, Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative, child soldiers, Lord's Resistance Army

Introduction

Following the overthrow of President Idi Amin by Tanzanian forces in 1979 there was a new period of conflict and instability in Uganda before President Yoweri Museveni came to power in 1986. By 1987 most northern insurgents had struck a deal with Museveni, but a splinter group led by Joseph Kony remained in the bush. The local Acholi people generally felt that there was no need to continue the armed struggle, so Kony began abducting, brainwashing and dehumanising young children to bolster his small force. His Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) gradually increased in size and became more destructive towards the local population. The government responded with a military approach, herding people into "protected" camps to isolate the LRA, but this policy failed to deter them and itself caused great hardship. In the early 1990s there were some attempts to bring peace, but the Ugandan military were not in favour, and the death, destruction and suffering continued. This was the situation that the new Archbishop of Gulu found when he was appointed in 1999.

The Night Commuters of Gulu.

As dusk fell, Archbishop John Baptist Odama approached the bus park in the northern Ugandan town of Gulu on foot, carrying his sleeping mat and blanket. With him were two Anglican bishops, a Muslim Kadi, and an Orthodox priest, all members of the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI). The religious leaders settled down to sleep on the rough ground amongst the thousands of schoolchildren who were already there, the "night commuters" who made the journey every evening from their homes in the surrounding villages to sleep in the streets of Gulu to avoid being abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). When the children saw "big people" coming to join them, they all wanted to be near them, feeling a sense of comfort and security in their presence. After two nights, the children began referring to them as "our colleagues". Caritas provided blankets, which the faith leaders would spread over the sleeping children without waking them.

When the Prime Minister heard the news, he indignantly challenged the archbishop, "How can you sleep in the street where you might be shot amidst the insecurity?"¹ The archbishop responded, "What signal does it send if your children are sleeping in the street while you are at home in a

All quotes are from interviews with Archbishop Odama in 2022 unless attributed otherwise.

comfortable bed? You can't sleep in peace! These are our children, and we cannot abandon them.” But others also noticed, and for the first-time diplomats and media from the international community begun to take an interest in the long-running insurgency in northern Uganda.

Archbishop Odama's Efforts for Peace.

Archbishop Odama was no stranger to the LRA conflict. As rector of the seminary in Alokolum he had invited the local population to shelter in the seminary, and he had established a reputation for integrity, a man to be trusted. In his new archdiocese he found that the faith leaders had already realised that they needed to work together and had established ARLPI. Before long he was elected as Chair, and while many would say that he brought a new impetus, he himself insists that it was not him alone but the synergy of the group. Struggling to understand why the horrendous suffering of the people of northern Uganda appeared to receive little international nor indeed national attention, he asked the New Sudan Council of Churches just across the border to share some of their experience of advocacy and peacebuilding in a workshop in Gulu. Maybe it was here that he realised that you need more than a worthy cause to interest the international community – you need something “newsworthy” that catches their attention. And so it was in 2003 that his love and concern for the suffering children, expressed by an act of solidarity with them in the Gulu bus station, also became a hook to catch the attention of the world.

His efforts for peace did not make him popular, particularly with President Museveni, who was still pursuing a military option. There were times when the archbishop's life was threatened by both parties, each accusing him of collaborating with the other side. However his message remained consistent, that he was not for or against either side, he only wanted to halt the death and suffering of the ordinary people on the ground. He spoke fearlessly and prophetically for the good of the people, but carefully, avoiding a partisan political stance. He declined to defend himself against any of the defamation, which he believes would only be a distraction from the real issue, the suffering of the people. For a long period Museveni refused to refer to him as “archbishop”, instead addressing him publicly as “Mr Odama”. The archbishop explains, “He knows who I am, so I don't need to comment on that. He and I have different platforms; his is national, mine is local. I am the slave of the people, and the people I'm serving are suffering. I have no quarrel with the president. I forgive him”. Trust-building takes a long time, but the archbishop's humility, consistency and integrity gradually won the respect of both Kony and Museveni, both of whom probably also feared him, knowing that his voice was heard both domestically and internationally. The president eventually began to praise the archbishop publicly and openly, and even invited him to speak alongside him at the presidential podium, calling him his “brother”. In particular they found common ground in promoting agricultural development projects for rebuilding after the conflict.

This is not the place to tell the full story of the peace talks with the LRA, how the Vicar General of the Archdiocese of Gulu was surprised to one day receive out of the blue a phone call from Vice President Riek Machar in southern Sudan, which had also been suffering from the LRA, saying “We need the archbishop to come to open the peace talks which we are brokering with Joseph Kony”; how the archbishop and his colleagues from ARLPI undertook several dangerous journeys into the bush to meet Kony personally, established a degree of trust and understanding, and made a great deal of progress; and how the talks finally broke down because the International Criminal Court (ICC) insisted on the arrest and trial of Kony, a step he was not willing to countenance. Most

of the ordinary people in northern Uganda and southern Sudan only wanted peace, and Kony had expressed his willingness to accept restorative justice and to undertake a traditional reconciliation process known as *mato put*, but the international community was obsessed with a punitive form of retributive justice and would not back down. The archbishop is convinced that without the ICC, Kony would have signed the final peace agreement in 2008. Nevertheless, this “failed” peace process hastened the effective end of the LRA as a significant insurgent force, being relegated to nothing more than a small mercenary group tacitly supported by the regime in Khartoum.

What makes a “peace bishop”?

Archbishop Odama's father seems to have played an influential role. When the young Odama went off to school, leaving his village for the first time, his father told him that the outside world is different from the village. “You only know people here. Outside you will meet different people. Respect the elders as you would me and your mother. Treat others like your brothers and sisters. Don't create enmity, because then they will also see all of us as their enemies, not you alone. Respect everybody, even disabled people. Be free with everybody.” After ordination, his father declared that he was no longer only part of “us” but part of the wider world, “This boy is no longer ours, but by the work he is being given he belongs to the people” and told him, “So work for them - I will be following you!” And he did – from time to time he would come to check up on his son “like a school prefect”! There are shades of *ubuntu* in his father's advice, and it certainly sowed the seeds of respect for the dignity of all people.

The future archbishop met Vatican II in the seminary, and found that it rhymed not only with his own experience but recognised what was already happening in the world, “reading the signs of the times”. He believes that since Pope St John XXIII, popes have been more in touch with the world, and that the approach is now unity, brotherhood and sisterhood, and human rights, an approach which excludes violence. Pope Paul VI's 1965 speech to the UN in which he declared, “No more war, war never again. It is peace, peace which must guide the destinies of peoples and of all mankind” was certainly important to him, as were Catholic Social Teaching, ecumenism and interfaith dialogue. The visits of Popes St John Paul II and Francis to Uganda were also important. Francis made it clear that he came for all Ugandans, not only Catholics. He was welcomed and honoured by Anglicans and Muslims, visited the Anglican martyrs' shrine, made it clear that the Catholic and Anglican martyrs died together, and called for Christians to imitate the martyrs in modern times facing modern challenges. All of this affirms Archbishop Odama's vision.

One final indication of the type of man Archbishop Odama is. When in 1996 he was appointed bishop of the new diocese of Nebbi, adjacent to Gulu where he would later become archbishop, his first act was to ask people in each of the distant and isolated outstation chapels to build for him a small mud and grass shelter where he could come and stay with them for a few nights. People were shocked – a bishop sleeping in a simple local shelter! True to his word, he managed to visit most of them, to learn first hand about the people of whom he was now shepherd, and they would proudly lead him to “the archbishop's house” in their small village. Elderly Catholics would greet him in tears and tell him they had never spoken to a bishop before, and never even seen one except perhaps in the distance at a high altar in a cathedral at some big diocesan event. His closeness to the people is both a source and a result of his commitment to ending their suffering.

As we know very well within our Catholic tradition, activism which is not rooted in spirituality

can become misguided and even harmful, to both the activist and society. The archbishop is well aware of this, and even amidst his busy schedule, with people queuing up outside his office from early morning, he reserves one full day a week for prayer and fasting. Thus he keeps himself centred and on the true path.

Conclusion

Since the end of the LRA reign of terror, Archbishop Odama has continued to focus on the dignity of the suffering people, working for reconciliation, peace, justice, trauma healing, poverty reduction and development. He has received a number of international awards for his work, and has proved willing to share his experience wherever and whenever requested. He has been active in the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative and was one of the accompaniers at the spiritual retreat for the leaders of South Sudan's warring factions which was hosted by the Holy Father in Rome in 2019. The archbishop treasures his experience with the LRA, which he sees as a privilege, not to be wasted. It has matured him, leading him to value the life of a human being above everything and to work for peace, forgiveness, nonviolence, harmony, and restoring right relationships.

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