

Immaculée Ilibagiza

Immaculée Ilibagiza was born in 1972 in Rwanda, a relatively small nation (and former colony of Belgium) in central sub-Saharan Africa. In April of 1994, when Immaculée was in her early twenties, civil unrest quickly escalated to what has come to be known as the Rwandan genocide.

Members of the Hutu ethnic group began targeting and massacring members of the Tutsi ethnic group. Immaculée and her family, as Tutsis, were in mortal danger. Sadly, most of Immaculée's immediate family—including her parents and two of her brothers (a third brother was studying in Senegal)—were killed in one of the violent raids. Immaculée was able to escape and went into hiding with other Tutsi women in the cramped bathroom of a family friend. She remained in this space for ninety-one days. During that time, her weight dropped from 115 pounds to just 65 pounds.

The home's owner provided the women with as much food as he could without appearing suspicious. During this ordeal, with the constant threat that they might be discovered by the marauding Hutu troops, who frequently searched the neighboring homes, Immaculée prayed fervently and silently, including the Rosary, for hours every day. During the women's confinement, Immaculée also began learning English with nothing but a Bible and a French-English dictionary.

In July of 1994, French soldiers arrived in Rwanda, bringing an end to the massacre and securing a level of peace and stability by supporting a new government. The death toll of the genocide was overwhelming: around one million innocent Tutsis, along with Hutus who aided their Tutsi countrymen, were killed in the Rwandan genocide. It remains one of the deadliest conflicts of the modern era. Immaculée Ilibagiza was afraid that this dreadful experience would leave her forever bitter and wounded. Instead, she emerged from captivity with a willingness to forgive. She came face-to-face with the killer of her mother and was able to utter the words "I forgive you."

Immaculée continued learning English and eventually moved to the United States, where she settled with her husband and their children. Immaculée went on to write books about the Catholic faith, her first being the 2006 classic *Left to Tell: Discovering God amidst the Rwandan Holocaust*. She is now an international speaker who shares her account of how her reliance on Christ gave her courage in the middle of genocide and how her Catholic faith sustained her and her family. Immaculée has also encouraged reconciliation and forgiveness for those who were responsible for carrying out the Rwandan genocide. In 2013, Immaculée became an American citizen, and she regularly meets and consults with Catholic leaders around the world as they labor to spread the Good News of Christ.

Reading Comprehension

1. What was the situation in Rwanda that caused Immaculée to go into hiding in the bathroom of a family friend?
2. What was Immaculée's attitude after she left her confinement?
3. How has Immaculée lived out her Catholic faith in the years since the Rwandan genocide?

Writing Task

Though Immaculée's experience is foreign to the experience of American Catholics, what can you learn from it? In three detailed paragraphs, explain a lesson(s) from Immaculée Ilibagiza that you can apply to your own Christian life.

Explaining the Faith

How can I tell if I have a religious vocation?

Every person has a vocation—that is, a “calling”—to love others, be holy, and serve God through serving others. Perhaps God is calling you to serve him as a priest, sister, or brother. This call may be subtle but persistent. It often begins with an interior attraction, a yearning or desire to be as close as possible to God. Your interest may also be piqued by friendship with or admiration for a priest, sister, or brother. It’s important not to stifle these feelings for fear of what others might say or because you find the idea of a religious vocation a bit scary.

There are several things you can do to help determine whether the priesthood or professed religious life may be your life’s vocation.

- First, look at the type of person you are. Do you have the qualities needed to serve God as a priest or vowed religious? For example, are you basically a kind, genuine, moral person concerned about the welfare of others? Do you have a strong desire to serve Christ and share his Gospel? Are you unselfish, able to take direction, flexible, cooperative, and loving? Are you emotionally well-balanced, of good intelligence, and physically healthy? Also, those who interview candidates for the priesthood or religious life are looking to see whether candidates can live a vow of celibacy. They also may ask you your motive for inquiring about this kind of life. Service is a good motive.
- Second, pray! Prayer is essential to friendship with Jesus and discovering your vocation. Ask Jesus for insight and courage about a possible vocation.
- Third, try several ways to serve God and the Church right now. For example, help with school or parish liturgies, volunteer to assist grade-school religious education classes, or get involved in social justice programs at your school or in your community.
- Finally, if your desire for priesthood or religious life persists, speak to someone about your feelings. Look for a person you admire and who has answered a calling that you are considering. Without exerting pressure, this person can direct you to the next step.

Additionally, do not forget to make use of the discernment survey that was assigned as part of the “Discerning Vocation Facts” feature in Chapter 10, Section 4.



Further Research

Examine the vocation site of a religious community or diocesan office that you have knowledge of or interest in. Based on the information offered, write about the first step(s) a person would undertake if he or she were discerning a religious vocation.

Chapter 10 Teacher Resources

Faithful Disciple: Immaculée Ilibagiza

Reading Comprehension

1. What was the situation in Rwanda that caused Immaculée to go into hiding in the bathroom of a family friend? *Most of her family, members of the Tutsi tribe, were killed at the hands of Hutus during the Rwandan genocide, and she was able to escape.*
2. What was Immaculée’s attitude after she left her confinement? *She was afraid that she would be bitter and wounded, but instead emerged from hiding with a willingness to forgive.*
3. How has Immaculée lived out her Catholic faith in the years since the Rwandan genocide? *She is an author and international speaker, traveling around the world sharing how her reliance on Christ gave her courage in the middle of genocide, and how her Catholic faith sustained her and her family. She has also encouraged reconciliation and forgiveness for those who perpetrated the Rwandan genocide and regularly meets with Catholic leaders around the world.*

Writing Task

Though Immaculée’s experience is foreign to the experience of American Catholics, what can you learn from it? In three detailed paragraphs, explain a lesson(s) from Immaculée Ilibagiza that you can apply to your own Christian life. *Accept student responses that discuss thoughtful connections to Immaculée’s experience in a way that is clear and thorough. They might discuss, for instance, her courage, her reliance on prayer in a time of despair, her inspiring willingness to forgive her oppressors, or the reminder her example gives us to remain aware of the plight of people around the world and to commit ourselves to service.*

Additional Background Information

Immaculée’s website is www.immaculee.com.

Her Facebook page is www.facebook.com/immaculee.

For further information on the Rwandan genocide, including contributing historical factors related to European colonialization, see:

- “Rwandan Genocide,” The History Channel, www.history.com/topics/rwandan-genocide
- Jennifer Rosenberg, “A Short History of the Rwandan Genocide,” ThoughtCo., updated January 6, 2019, www.thoughtco.com/the-rwandan-genocide-1779931
- Bridget Johnson, “A History of Hutu-Tutsi Conflict,” updated January 21, 2018, www.thoughtco.com/history-of-hutu-tutsi-conflict-3554917

Here is Immaculée speaking on the power of prayer to heal suffering—and specifically on the Seven Sorrows Rosary, a devotion near to her heart—from her prayer corner in her home: Immaculée Ilibagiza, “Healing Prayer—The Seven Sorrows Rosary,” January 24, 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=HxxVwVJfMiY

Explaining the Faith

How can I tell if I have a religious vocation?

Further Research

Examine the vocation site of a religious community or diocesan office that you have knowledge of or interest in. Based on the information offered, write about the first step(s) a person would undertake if he or she were discerning a religious vocation. *Assist students as appropriate in learning about religious communities near you or in finding a community to research that connects to their particular interests (education, health care, international work, service to the urban poor, etc.). If your school is connected to an order, that might be an appealing starting point for students. If you have more than one student who is truly interested in a particular order or community, you might allow them to work together on this assignment to encourage conversation.*

Additional Background and Resources

Here are some resources for educators on promoting vocational discernment and creating a culture that is open to vocations: “Best Practices,” USCCB, www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/vocations/educators-and-youth-leaders/best-practices/index.cfm.

An explanation of the different ways we use the term *vocation* and how they fit together: Fr. Mike Schmitz, “What’s My Vocation?” Ascension Presents, July 1, 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJz9PbakIzY.

A Dominican sister shares how God called her through the genuine joy of the sisters in Nashville and an inexplicable feeling of being “home”: “Discerning God’s Plan for Your Life,” Ascension Presents, Sr. Maris Stella, www.youtube.com/watch?v=80msIR5Zs6s.