Columns
Ministry



Members of Famille Esperance stand alongside Cardinal Antoine Kambanda following a Mass. Sr. Immaculee Uwamariya stands fifth from the right. Famille Esperance is dedicated to promoting harmonious living with Christian and human values, strengthening family bonds, and spreading God's love through marriage. (Courtesy of Sr. Immaculee Uwamariya)



by Immaculee Uwamariya

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I was born on July 17th, 1970, as the eldest of three siblings — two girls and one boy. Tragically, my brother passed away during the devastating 1994 genocide against Tutsis. Growing up, I pursued my education, studying economics in high school and later delving into educational psychology. Today, I am honored to serve as the headmistress of College St. Bernard, a girls high school in Kansi, Rwanda.

My life's journey has been marred by profound loss. In 1987, I experienced the heartbreak of losing both my parents, leaving me without their guidance and support. Subsequently, I found comfort when my aunt's family adopted me. However, tragedy struck again in 1994 when my adoptive family fell victim to the same genocide. Since then, I have carried the void of not having my biological parents around.

During my high school years, I began contemplating becoming a religious sister. My primary motivation stemmed from my profound love for prayer, which always brought me comfort. Additionally, I felt a strong urge to assist others and contribute to keeping families together with Christian values. I firmly believed that the foundation of a better society lies within families, where love and strong bonds among family members can extend to the community, fostering the growth of religious figures, leaders and citizens. The well-being of families directly impacts an entire nation.

After the 1994 genocide, countless families were torn apart, with many losing family members, children becoming heads of households at young ages, and parents imprisoned for their involvement in the genocide. The Rwandan family structure was severely disrupted, leaving many of us without hope for the future.



Immaculee Uwamariya's early involvement with the Bernardine Sisters (Courtesy of Sr. Immaculee Uwamariya)

On Aug. 15, 1997, I consecrated my life to God and became a sister in the Bernardine Community. Ever since, I have devoted my life to prayer, simplicity and silence, taking inspiration from St. Bernard of Clairvaux to cherish God and welcome everybody in the image of God. Through vows of conversion of life, I have sought God within the community and committed myself to serving God through others, recognizing the inherent value in each individual as they reflect the image of the divine.

In 2012, during a 12-day vacation, I decided to dedicate one day to charity and meet with families to discuss their challenges in maintaining healthy family relationships. Divorce was increasingly common, and many family members had lost hope in the institution of marriage altogether. I wanted to help these families, especially since I had accompanied many of them before their marriages. However, I wasn't sure where to begin or how to provide the necessary assistance.



Participants are pictured during one of the regular retreats for families in Kigali, Rwanda. (Courtesy of Sr. Immaculee Uwamariya)

Despite my uncertainties, on Dec. 12, 2012, I took the initiative to organize the inaugural retreat with the theme: "How to Build a Strong Family through God." I invited 17 families to join me at Foyers de Charité Rebero. This retreat marked the birth of Famille Esperance, a Christian organization dedicated to promoting harmonious living with Christian and human values, strengthening family bonds, and spreading God's love through marriage.

In our commitment to this cause, we pledged to meet regularly, sharing our experiences and working towards improving our family relationships. It was during this transformative journey that my dear family friend, Sr. Laetitie Musanabaganwa, who was dedicated to families and fulfilling her vocation with the Benebikira Sisters, decided to join me. The Benebikira Sisters' charism, to evangelize by example, aligned perfectly with our mission. Together, we founded Famille Esperance, united in our purpose to make a positive impact on families and society.

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The second retreat, "Hope Family," was held at Centre Christus in Kigali, with 111 participating couples. Despite the logistical and organizational challenges, such as being in a small, overcrowded room, everyone supported our unwavering dedication to the success of the retreat and Famille Esperance. The experience highlighted the genuine dedication and passion among the participants, inspiring many of us to volunteer and contribute our time and efforts to the organization's growth and future retreats.



Sr. Immaculee Uwamariya participates in a youth retreat. (Courtesy of Sr. Immaculee Uwamariya)

Over time, we organized regular retreats on various subjects. However, we realized that those who had lost a spouse didn't fully align with Famille Esperance's teachings, which emphasized families with both parents. To address this, we began arranging exclusive retreats for single parents and divorced individuals, recognizing

their unique challenges and needs. Additionally, we initiated youth retreats, guiding young children to become responsible, compassionate family members and nurturing their desire to serve as priests, sisters, or exemplary parents in society. We also expanded our teachings to reach various family groups online, using platforms such as WhatsApp, Zoom, Google Meet, and YouTube. Additionally, I regularly share daily messages with all members of Famille Esperance and those who use online platforms. These messages focus on guiding families to build a strong foundation through God and illustrate how a harmonious family can resemble a little heaven on earth.

Today, the family faces numerous challenges. As a Bernardine Community Sister, inspired by St. Bernard of Clairvaux, my mission to support families to stay together, embrace harmony through God and Christian values, and be part of Famille Esperance has deeply enriched my spiritual journey. I am called to cherish God in every person I meet, and to treat them with respect and love. Additionally, I am compelled to help them find God in their lives, as St. Bernard of Clairvaux recommends. It is essential to listen and carefully discern today's messages and signs to respond with appropriate action. Neglecting the challenges that families face and taking no action does not align with God's will and the messages we receive. Therefore, it is crucial to be proactive in responding to the needs of others and allowing God to be present in their lives through our actions and compassion.



The online women's class expresses heartfelt gratitude to Sister Immaculee for being as "their little mother" throughout their journey. (Courtesy of Sr. Immaculee Uwamariya)

As Pope St. John Paul II once stated, "As the family goes, so goes the nation, and so goes the whole world in which we live." I firmly believe that strong families form the foundation of everything, producing outstanding priests, sisters, parents, and human beings. It is in this spirit that I have been appointed to the Catholic commission by Rwandan Cardinal Antoine Kambanda of Kigal to promote awareness of family values within the Catholic Church. Having lost my parents at a young age has shaped my desire to help others, regardless of their religious beliefs or backgrounds, in their pursuit of a God-centered and hopeful family life.

I firmly believe that despite our limited resources, Famille Esperance is committed to assisting as many families as possible, regardless of their backgrounds or religious affiliations. The vulnerability of families is evident to everyone today, and while our volunteers are dedicated to supporting Famille Esperance’s initiatives, the number of families in need remains significant. Therefore, I earnestly call upon our friends

and supporters to join hands with us on this journey. The well-being of the family is a concern for each and every one of us, and together, we can make a meaningful impact and bring positive change to the lives of those who require our help.