

“María Ruiz Scaperlanda’s intimate portrait of Sr. Rosemary Nyirumbe in *Sewing Hope in Uganda* delights the reader with rich details and tender observations that reveal a complex woman of God who can be fierce yet gentle, tenacious and bold, unrelenting but loving. Scaperlanda’s masterful storytelling invites us on a journey of discovery into the heart of Sr. Rosemary’s mission to empower women devastated by violence and oppression in Uganda.”

—Maria Morera Johnson, author of *Super Girls and Halos: My Companions on the Quest for Truth, Justice and Heroic Virtue* and *My Badass Book of Saints: Courageous Women Who Showed Me How to Live*

“This small book is a moving introduction to the life and work of Sister Rosemary Nyirumbe who has been called the ‘Mother Teresa of Africa’. Be prepared to be inspired by the joy, the faith, the motherly love and indomitable spirit of this woman who has had such impact in the lives of young African women and girls who were victims of one of the most horrific atrocities of our time. It is a testament to hope and healing.”

—Most Reverend Paul S. Coakley  
Archbishop of Oklahoma City

“Where there is great evil, there is often greater good to be found, if we could only see it. Maria Scaperlanda’s moving account of Sister Rosemary Nyirumbe’s work in Uganda is a powerful testament to a diminutive Sister with the heart of a lioness. Sister Rosemary has faced down great evil with greater faith while rescuing the victims of one of Africa’s most cruel conflicts. *Rosemary Nyirumbe: Sewing Hope in Uganda* is a story of hope for all Christians and a moving testimony to the witness of the Church in East Africa, a modern-day cradle of martyrs and saints-in-the-making.”

—Greg Erlandson, Director and Editor in Chief, Catholic News Service

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# Rosemary Nyirumbe

*Sewing Hope in Uganda*

María Ruiz Scaperlanda



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*To the Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus  
in Uganda, Kenya, and South Sudan,  
and to all unknown or forgotten women  
who have transformed families, communities,  
and countries  
by the power of their faith witness*



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# Foreword

The Hasidic rabbi Levi Yitzhak of the Ukraine is fond of telling friends of his visit to the Polish countryside. One evening the rabbi was visiting the owner of a tavern. As he walked in, he saw two peasants at a table. Both were drinking with reckless abandon, arms around each other, protesting how much each loved the other. Suddenly Ivan said to Peter: “Peter, tell me, what hurts me?” Bleary-eyed, Peter looked at Ivan: “How do I know what hurts you?” Ivan’s answer was swift: “If you don’t know what hurts me, how can you say you love me?”

Like Ivan, my good friend Sister Rosemary Nyirumbe believes she needs to know all the afflictions of the youth she serves with a heart akin to the master Jesus. Sister Rosemary listens with attentive love to everyone she ministers to, but there is obviously a special place in her heart for the girls at St. Monica’s Girls Tailoring Center in Gulu, Uganda. She helps them to reclaim their lives from their former rebel captors.

The girls Sister Rosemary ministers to are among the most stigmatized of all youth. They regularly encounter cruel remarks within their home communities that make them grow more and more bitter: “You are carrying the child of a murderer.” “You are damaged goods.” “You are a disgrace

to your family and to all of us.” Sister Rosemary has set her heart on healing the wounds of this war. She is starting by healing the wounded spirits of these child mothers who lost so much of their self-esteem to the nightmarish disaster in their homeland. This determined nun has given hundreds upon hundreds of these girls vocational skills, an income, and taught them the techniques and know-how that will enable them to be self-sufficient in the future. The stories of pain and resilience found on these pages reveal an incredibly wise and prudent companion for humanity’s young.

I could never forget my first experience with Sister Rosemary. In July of 2001, I journeyed from Kampala, Uganda, northward to Gulu. In those days, the roads were in deplorable condition and it was going to be a long day’s trip. Still, Sister Rosemary insisted we carve out time to stop at a refugee camp we would pass by in order to spend time encouraging the vast throng of people who were forced to live there temporarily in dehumanizing squalor. We had no supplies or financial resources to share with these desperately deprived people. Nevertheless, Sister Rosemary had a word of encouragement for everyone she encountered, rallying hope in their spirits and spreading her infectious joy everywhere. Most of us would have been frightened or overwhelmed by such abject misery. Sister Rosemary saw an opportunity to bring Christ’s compassionate spirit to humanity’s most forgotten. I will never forget what I saw that day. I will never again underestimate the power of presence, companioning others who have been forced to bear the most crushing burdens in the human family.

María Ruiz Scaperlanda has chronicled Sister Rosemary’s life and ministry in a compelling narrative that will connect you to an extraordinary life well lived. Learning of the adventures of others who are reaching out to touch our hurt-

ing world with grace is a call to action for ourselves and all. It spurs us on to do whatever is in our power to allow the compassion of Jesus's spirit to flow through us.

On her trips abroad, Sister Rosemary always takes with her the beautiful craftwork of her girls to show to others and to sell on their behalf. This is one concrete measure that reinforces for the girls that they can make something valuable others will want and will help them generate income. The items that are most popular are necklaces made from discarded paper. It is rolled very, very tightly into beads, which are then dyed multicolors and strung together. The materials for crafting these necklaces cost practically nothing but the task is labor intensive. The final outcome is a gorgeous piece of jewelry that originates from discarded material. One woman who purchased a necklace while Sister Rosemary was visiting Cleveland, Ohio, relates how, several times a day while wearing that particularly precious necklace, she lets her fingers move gently across the beads. She pauses for a moment. That moment becomes a prayer as she calls to mind the girls who crafted this treasure and she asks God to favor their future with grace and goodness. By such simple acts of grace I see Sister Rosemary bringing our world together in realms of grace and friendship.

To many of us in North America, the senseless violence that Sister Rosemary has been an eyewitness of appears exceedingly tragic but remote. It must be the concern of someone other than ourselves. The moral genius of people like Sister Rosemary Nyirumbe is that they are teaching all of us that there is no such thing as other people's children. Whenever we allow a girl or boy anywhere on earth to be reduced to a nonperson, then one more thread is plucked out of the fabric that holds the human family together. Until our moral outrage joins with Sister Rosemary's and that of

our brothers and sisters around the world, children will continue to suffer in hidden ways.

Where others see only pain, danger, and a reason why they are unable to act, Sister Rosemary sees possibilities and promise. If I were restricted to a single adjective to describe Sister Rosemary, I know what word I would choose. Courageous! On a Sunday afternoon enjoying lunch with the nuns at St. Monica's, I was caught up in yet another courageous episode along Sister Rosemary's journey. A dozen girls raced into the dining hall screaming for help and shouting about a cobra in the henhouse. There was a ten-foot-long, deadly cobra that had made its way onto the school property. I immediately jumped up and went looking for a custodian, or some other brave staff member, to confront this lethal danger. Sister Rosemary immediately jumped up and went for a machete, which she could use to attack the cobra and defend the girls. I watched, from a safe distance, as Sister Rosemary attacked the cobra, cutting it in ten pieces! The girls had long known that Sister Rosemary would do anything to defend them. This was one more proof of a commitment that is helping to heal and transform their lives.

Michael Ford, in his biography of the Dutch theologian Henri Nouwen, tells us how radically honest Nouwen was emotionally. Sometimes when loneliness or suffering would threaten to overwhelm him, Nouwen would go to a friend's house and ask that friend to hold him while he cried. Not an easy thing to do, but in it there is a lesson: when we stare life's pain and our own fears fully in the face, someone or something had better be holding us or that darkness will destroy us rather than make us stronger.

Sister Rosemary has spent a lifetime holding in her arms the hurting children of Africa. Her inspiration can be a guidepost for us all! The moving stories told here by María Ruiz

Scaperlanda are certain to inspire compassionate action and greater solidarity. Faith requires no less of a response.

Rev. Donald H. Dunson, PhD  
Author of *No Room at the Table:  
Earth's Most Vulnerable Children* and  
*Child, Victim, Soldier: The Loss of Innocence in Uganda*



# Acknowledgments

It is difficult to express just what a pleasure it has been to write about Sister Rosemary Nyirumbe, to be the author who has the privilege of introducing this formidable woman to the readers of the *People of God* series.

Over the past several decades I have been privileged to meet and write about many impressive Catholics from around the world. Sometimes they are well known, even famous—men and women who are impressive in their dedication and generous spirit, as well as worthy of our admiration and respect.

Yet what has been most rewarding for me over the years as a Catholic journalist is to find those souls who toil away—almost always unknown and unrecognized—who are living faith-filled, prayer-full lives, and who are consistent in living their Catholic faith. Paraphrasing Cardinal Joseph Bernardin's words, each of these men and women embodies what it means to be a Catholic wrapped in a seamless garment of faith. Truly, something inside me leaps every time I encounter them, the Holy Spirit rejoicing and recognizing the Truth and Love lived by these individuals.

Sister Rosemary Nyirumbe is one such spirit, someone both Orthodox and radical. Yes, she is a woman of deep faith, grounded in the Eucharist, and a Sister of the Sacred

Heart of Jesus community. But as she likes to say, don't dismiss her struggle because she is a nun!

Sister Rosemary is a genuine disciple of Jesus Christ because she chooses to grapple daily with what it means to live out her vocation—especially reaching out to the broken and bleeding and needy, the living Body of Christ whom she sees in the women and orphans in northern Uganda. It is her ministry of presence, above all, that makes her example so powerful and meaningful.

My first thanks, therefore, is to Barry Hudock, who invited me to take on this beautiful project. Also, many thanks to the Liturgical Press staff who have worked with me at every step of the publishing process to bring this book into your hands.

It has been my heart's pleasure to meet the community of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Uganda. Thank you for your generous hospitality, for bringing us into your prayer and sharing with us your every meal. You made me feel so at home! A special thank-you to Sister Doreen Oyella and to Comboni Father Luigi Gabaglio, who so generously traveled many hours and many days throughout northern Uganda with us, always willing, explaining, remembering, and introducing me to their world.

This book owes a great debt to Reggie Whitten, and to the Sewing Hope Foundation and Pros for Africa, for introducing us to Sister Rosemary through the book *Sewing Hope*, and to Derek Watson and his brilliant staff at Lighthouse Media for their award-winning documentary by the same name. I hope and pray that this book makes everyone who reads it want to know more. I heartily recommend readers to visit [SewingHopeFoundation.com](http://SewingHopeFoundation.com) to learn how to join Sister Rosemary in her ministry.

How can I thank my sister in faith and heart friend, Sister Rosemary, whose voice I regularly hear in my head, singing to me, “María . . . makes me . . . laugh!” May God bless abundantly your willing heart. Thank you for your witness of faith and service, for your generous love, for bringing me into your expansive heart—and for showing me what it means to recognize God in every person and every situation. You continue to inspire me!

Finally, as always, I’d like to express my gratitude to the Tribe that is my family—my mother and brother, my adult children, my amazing Grands, and especially my husband, Michael, for his encouragement and love, and for introducing me to Sister Rosemary!



# Introduction

A sad nun is a bad nun. . . . I am more afraid of one unhappy sister than a crowd of evil spirits. . . . What would happen if we hid what little sense of humor we had? Let each of us humbly use this to cheer others.

Teresa of Ávila, in James Martin, SJ,  
*Between Heaven and Mirth*

Our four-wheeling Toyota Land Cruiser snakes and curves in the twilight, struggling to miss as many potholes as possible. But some dirt holes are simply so large that they bring our vehicle to a complete stop before our skilled driver can finally, slowly, move us forward.

Fast or slow, red dirt rises around us like a thick fog, restraining our vision and overpowering our sense of smell. Shockingly, neither the darkness nor the dirt, not even our speed, impedes pedestrians of all ages from sharing the road with us.

I watch a line of three women, one behind the other, carrying five-gallon yellow containers of water on their heads. Even as our car slides past them, the women continue, seemingly unaffected, determined, skillfully maneuvering their own steps around both the fast-moving vehicles and potholes.

## 2 Rosemary Nyirumbe

We are in northern Uganda, in what is colloquially known as West Nile, a mere stone's throw away from the South Sudan border. I'm sharing the back seat of the four-wheel-drive vehicle with Sister Rosemary Nyirumbe, who nudges me, then raises her hand to point to the sign rushing past us, announcing our destination: Moyo. It's no wonder that she warned me as we got in the car, "The road to Moyo is like going to Calvary! But Moyo . . . Moyo is paradise!"

Much like the way that New York City locals describe distance in time, not miles, Sister Rosemary's eyes smile as she turns and whispers to me, "Only twenty more minutes," which in non-Uganda time *really* means at least another half hour, although not quite an hour. No matter. She continues fidgeting with the beads of her rosary with her left hand. In map terms, we are a mere ninety-one miles northwest of Gulu, the largest city in northern Uganda, but the journey has already taken several hours.

The landscape surrounding us is anything but an urban metropolis. It smells humid, and it is eerily silent. The car headlights bounce light into the growing darkness, occasionally revealing a goat in the bush or a group of barefooted children herding a cow with a stick on their way home for supper. We are slowly climbing up, with mahogany trees and luscious bush showing off their beauty to either side of us.

In modern African history, northern Uganda is infamously known for its violent stories. Idi Amin carried out mass executions of its native Acholi and Lango Christian tribes as well as other ethnic groups, a tragedy followed by years of tribal "bush wars." Soon afterward, for decades that persisted into the early 2000s, the region sheltered the violent guerrillas of warlord Joseph Rao Kony and his militia, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), as it moved across the borders of Sudan, Congo, and back.

Hearing the stories of Sister Rosemary Nyirumbe's life makes the history of northern Uganda seem simultaneously otherworldly and intensely relevant. Her story is, in fact, intricately woven with the tragic, extreme, yet ultimately hopeful history of this region in central Africa.

Best known as the driving force who saved hundreds of children from abduction during the bloody wars that have devastated northern Uganda and Sudan for decades, Sister Rosemary walks with a sense and force of purpose and, always, with joy. No small task for a woman who not only lived through these often brutal moments in her country's history, but who also stood up to the evil before her, time and time again—all in the name of what she calls the gospel of presence, healing, and forgiveness.

She was born in Paidha, approximately one hundred miles—but four and a half hours by car—southwest of Moyo. For almost twenty years, she has lived and worked at St. Monica's Girls Tailoring Centre rescuing and teaching marketable skills to women and children who suffered first when they were abducted, and then again when they were forced to join the violent, gruesome world of Kony's militia. The one place that has always welcomed them back from the bush is St. Monica's in Gulu, 122 miles and over three hours on dirt roads from the small village of huts with grass roofs where she was born. As she likes to note, she has spent almost all of the sixty-two years of her life living in basically three locations, which form a triangle in northern Uganda: Paidha, Moyo, and Gulu—strategically situated on the main route between the capital cities of Kampala (Uganda) and Juba (South Sudan).

Perhaps that's part of what makes Sister Rosemary's recent world-wide notoriety all the more remarkable. While she doesn't hesitate to speak out for the poorest among us, she

nevertheless shies away from recognition—quickly pointing to others in her community and to the brave work they are doing. She laughs often, and heartily, especially as she explains how most members of her tribe, the Alur, look physically like her—“short and robust”—while their neighbors, the Acholi, are lean and tall. Yet the same woman who jokes about her five-foot stature has also shaken hands with foreign presidents, kings, American NBA stars, and Pope Francis. Rome Reports described her in 2017 as “the Mother Teresa of Africa.” But, she will interrupt to say, grinning, “None of these things make me taller than what I am! I’m level headed because I don’t see these things as lifting me to be someone different.”

Although active abductions of children in northern Uganda ended in 2006, even now the girls are continuing to escape from their bush captivity. And Sister Rosemary passionately describes story after horrifying story of what these children have lived through and why they need us. “Just last year we had girls who came to us from captivity. This year we have two girls who were BORN in captivity!” While the sisters’ work has changed, she emphasizes, it is far from done—remaining faithful to the mission of providing a safe home and education for victims of war and violence, particularly orphans and young women.

If her eyes could talk, they would tell hundreds of gruesome stories that Sister Rosemary has witnessed or heard throughout the years—like the story of Valerie,<sup>1</sup> the girl who arrived at St. Monica’s with a baby barely a month old. After years in the bush under rebels’ rule, Valerie had escaped, just one week after giving birth to little Joy. When Valerie approached Sister Rosemary grumbling about her roommate, Sister Rosemary initially dismissed it as a petty grievance between girls. Then Valerie began to describe how the rebels had forced her to kill villagers “in the most brutal

way”—including her roommate’s parents. “Now she is helping me take care of my baby,” she told Sister Rosemary. “I feel so bad . . . I can’t sleep in the same room with her. What if she finds out?” As Valerie sobbed, Sister Rosemary pondered how to be a mother in this terrible situation.

“Don’t be afraid,” Sister Rosemary finally said to Valerie. “Tell her what happened. She may be upset at first, but she will understand because she was forced to do the same to other people. So she knows what it’s like, and she will eventually forgive you. . . . You are sisters now.” Loving those who have never known love—and whom the world believes don’t deserve love, notes Sister Rosemary—required that she and her sisters become spiritual mothers for the girls at St. Monica’s. And that’s exactly what the Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus have done in Gulu, for the past two decades.

Sister Rosemary Nyirumbe is one of *Time* magazine’s “100 Most Influential People in the World” (2014). She is the subject of the book *Sewing Hope* and a documentary by the same name, narrated by Academy Award–winning actor Forest Whitaker (2013). She received the United Nations Impact Award, the John Paul II *Veritatis Splendor* Award, and she has been named a CNN Hero. She even had a song written in her honor, “Touched by a Rose,” by JAIA.

But for “baby sister,” as her brothers, sisters, and family still call her, speaking engagements and awards are simply occasions to tell the story, “platforms where I can really speak on behalf of the voiceless, where I can speak perhaps a little louder than I could if I was only there. That’s all!” She pauses, smiles. “I have the great opportunity to speak on behalf of people who cannot speak for themselves.”

The truth is that “I am not strong,” says Sister Rosemary surprisingly, before adding, “so that keeps me dependent on

God! I keep praying, ‘*Give me the energy and the strength, and give me the right words to speak to each audience.*’” She looks to fellow Catholics for leadership in promoting the Gospel with compassion and justice, even though, she acknowledges, “oftentimes Catholics don’t show their faith easily. But you can’t sugarcoat evil. It would be better for us to begin to show our faith better. I would like the Catholics to continue being leaders. We have to speak up a little more!”—especially when it comes to being present to our suffering brothers and sisters around the globe.

Her eyes smile as she answers questions about her prayer life, noting that she loves the rosary. She has prayed the same four-word supplication every day of her life, “*Rwoth para, Mungu para*, my Lord and my God”—always spoken in her soul-language of Alur. “Love is the key for doing all the work we can do,” she clarifies, adding that Mother Teresa has joined her personal posse of saints, the ones that she relies on, because Mother Teresa’s calling was to do small things with great love. “Real love will *always* make you different.”

Sister Rosemary credits her love of children and the Italian Comboni sisters for her passionate ministry and religious vocation, a call she answered at the young age of fifteen. Her community of over 325 sisters, in fact, grew out of the Comboni Missionaries, when in 1976 the Comboni sisters encouraged them to form their own African community and to elect their first African superior general. In addition to their motherhouse in Juba, South Sudan, the Sacred Heart of Jesus Sisters also live out their motto—“Live Love in Truth”—in Kenya and Uganda, where most Sacred Heart vocations come from.

As our white Toyota approaches the gray and white Moyo Redeemer Orphanage building where we're going to spend the night, a weary Sister Rosemary leads us to an entryway with words painted in blue below a brick archway, "THIS HOME WAS FUNDED BY INTERNATIONAL REFUGEE TRUST-LONDON (IRT)." But before any one of us can say or do anything, we hear them. A lively group of girls wearing their finest dresses and boys in their best collar shirts begin singing a lovely welcome to us.

In spite of the late hour and her own tiredness, Sister Rosemary stops, leans against the wall, and begins clapping to the beat, letting the kids know that she loves it. She is beaming. The tune changes, the clapping continues, and a small girl walks forward, hands Sister a small flower, and curtsies away, too shy to stay long. But when the music stops, children of all ages reach out to touch the motherly sister whose hugs and voice embody God's love for each of them.

The older kids, who have been standing back behind the singers, patiently wait for their own moment with "Sister." She may be exhausted from the day of travel, but her demeanor, voice, and intensity do not show it. Sister Rosemary quizzes three of the taller girls on their current school subjects, then brings the conversation to a close by asking them, "What time are lights out? Shouldn't you already be in bed?" The girls just giggle in reply, wandering down the hall, presumably to their dormitory.

This Moyo orphanage has a lot of history, and a lot of stories to tell. But they will wait until the morning. Our group of five washes up, then sits to eat a banquet of grains, beans, vegetables with peanut sauce, fresh fruits, and *kwen*, also known as *kwon* in Acholi, a doughlike brown food served often with a meal. No salt-dried crickets tonight—a delicacy of northern Uganda, and a favorite treat of Sister Rosemary's.

Even at this late hour, Sister Rosemary has a remarkable, spontaneous sense of humor. When I ask her to turn to Sister Doreen for a staged photo, the two sisters start talking in Arabic and laughing out loud. Afterward she confesses, “We know not very useful Arabic!” she laughs. “I asked her, ‘Are you drunk?’ And Sister Doreen said, ‘No, I’m not drunk!’”

But the memories of Sister Rosemary’s time here are bittersweet, at best. Tribal conflicts. Soldiers and rebels. Children caught in the middle of the violence, sometimes abandoned by their own terrified parents fleeing the bloodshed. Little food. Delivering babies by flashlight in nighttime so dark that at times you can’t see your hand in front of your face.

Every retelling, however, concludes with a story about a particular child that she always remembers by name. And in almost every case, Sister Rosemary can add an epilogue to the trauma suffered by that child, one that makes it clear that she never stops touching base with the children in her stories, no matter how much time has passed by.

On my way to our bedroom, where we’ll sleep one night before heading to the Sacred Heart Sisters Ugandan Motherhouse on the other side of Moyo, I walk past a sign marking,

Inauguration  
Redemer Children’s Home  
29<sup>th</sup> March 2007  
by H. G. (His Grace) Archbishop  
Christopher Pierre  
Apostolic Nuncio to Uganda

Which gives me even more questions for Sister Rosemary. But I know she will take her time and make all things clear to me, with patience, laughter, and joy, tomorrow—no mat-

ter how grim or difficult the tale that goes with the explanation. She is a woman of faith, and prayer obviously fuels Sister Rosemary's every effort.

Like Martin de Porres, Marianne Cope, and other saints who advocated for the oppressed, Sister Rosemary knows her own talents—and her own weaknesses. She acknowledges that she's not strong, not able to do what she has to do, what she knows she must do. But that's what has made her kneel before Jesus over and over again, like the Canaanite woman, boldly and full of certainty that her request will be answered. With her whole being, she lives her vocation to the least in her midst—the children, the girls no one wants, the babies that have been cast away, left behind.

My starting—and final—prayer for you, the reader, is one that I know I share with Sister Rosemary Nyirumbe's heart. May the stories you find here bring you closer to the heart of Jesus, and to Our Lady. In the words of Sister Rosemary, "It's good for me to be close to the Mother of Jesus. It keeps it all among women!"

*Pray for us, o Holy Mother of God,  
that we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.*

June 3, 2018

Feast of the Uganda martyrs



## CHAPTER ONE

# Little Sister's Beginnings (1956–1975)

This abandonment establishes the soul in a peace which renders her capable of facing all her troubles. . . . My soul made frequent acts of abandonment during these storms and ended them, this time, by the desire and resolution to do something more for God.

Lucie Christine, in Astrid M. O'Brien, *A Mysticism of Kindness: The Biography of Lucie Christine*

Clumps of tall bushy pine trees seem out of place in the tropical highlands of northwest Uganda where nature shows off its bounty of cassava, coffee, mango, and banana trees. “They are grown for firewood,” Sister Rosemary says, explaining how the pine trees came to be part of her familiar landscape overlooking the Western Rift Valley. This area connects to the African Great Lakes, including to the far south Lake Victoria, the second largest freshwater lake in the world (by area).

The closer one gets to Sister Rosemary's hometown of Paidha, on the West Nile, the more obvious the road walkers become. Men, women, children—all walk on both sides of the red dirt road leading into town, many of them preschool and grade school children wearing school uniforms. “Little kids like to go to school because they get breakfast!” Sister Rosemary says with a smile, unable to contain the excitement in her voice. This is home. On the edge of Paidha, and not far down the dirt road from the parish church, is where Rosemary Nyirumbe was born and raised—and a number of her relatives still reside. In the middle of town there's a statute of a leopard, a symbol of the Alur chiefdom. “There are a lot of beautiful things about this area that I didn't notice until I missed them,” says Sister Rosemary, who was born here in 1956, “like the coolness of the air, the beauty of the Rift Valley, and the market. This village is now my favorite place to visit. It's hard to leave home.”

Since 1997, the government-run education system in Uganda has been known as “Universal Primary Education,” providing free education for children until the age of nineteen. But it is different for girls, notes Sister Rosemary. Parents with girls often keep them home to marry, and if a girl becomes pregnant she cannot go back to school. According to census data from 2004, for every ten students enrolled in primary schools, only one is enrolled at a secondary institution.<sup>1</sup> Officially, the literacy rate of Uganda is 69 percent, 76 percent for men, and 63 percent for women.<sup>2</sup>

But even sixty years ago, Ugandan education was better than that of their neighboring countries. And education was, in fact, the reason that Sister Rosemary's parents moved from their small town of Mahagi in Congo to Paidha, on the Uganda side of the banana trees. Martino Orwodhi and his wife Sabina Otiti had their first five children in Congo,

and three more after crossing into Uganda, where their eight children grew up learning English—the official language of the state, due to the country's long history under British rule. “We were supposed to be nine,” Sister Rosemary notes, “but one died [the second baby], Emilio. I never knew him.” The sons in the family are four: Valerio, Thomas, Luigi, and Santos. But their dad, Martino, had a special place in his heart for his daughters: Martha, Catherine, Perpetua, and especially his baby girl, Rosemary.

Martha, Sister Rosemary's oldest sister, still lives in their mother's house in the small village of round huts with grass roofs where Rosemary was born and raised. “I grew up in a hut,” Sister Rosemary says, looking over at the buildings shaped in a circle and clumped together. “The roofs are made of grass to keep the hut cooler,” Sister Rosemary explains, noting that grass roofs last about five years. One family normally has several huts, using each one for different groups of members of the family, such as one for the older children and one for the parents with the youngest children. “Sometimes we'd wash clothes and lay them on the roof to dry,” remembers Sister Rosemary. Their small grouping of homes is located so close to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) that DRC children cross the border regularly to attend school in their neighboring country. Sister Rosemary's childhood home is 122 miles and over three hours on a combination of tarmac and dirt roads from Gulu, where she now lives.

Unlike the typical cultural and historical distinctions made between men and women, Martino and Sabina valued education for their four boys *and* their four girls. Both sexes were also expected to toil in the garden (“woman's work”) as well as learn basic wood workshop skills from their carpenter father. Even when other family members derided them for wasting time, money, and energy on their girls,

Sabina was determined to educate the children equally—and she regularly convinced her husband to agree.

In spite of having little money and no extras in her upbringing, Rosemary grew up feeling happy and loved. From a very young age, she was quick to learn, a natural leader with the other children, and an excellent athlete—no doubt an acquired skill from years of keeping up with her older brothers. “I have many cousins and other relatives still living here,” says Sister Rosemary with a smile. “They all call me baby sister.”

Rosemary and her family come from the Alur people, part of the Lwo group, and their language is closely related to Acholi. According to Alur tradition, their people migrated from southern Sudan with other Lwo, following the banks of the Nile River into modern-day Uganda. Although also present in South Sudan, Kenya, Tanzania, and Congo, the large Lwo group lives mostly in the northern part of Uganda. Most members of the Alur tribe, in particular, reside in northern Uganda and far northeastern Congo. As much as they valued education, Sister Rosemary’s parents would be proud to know that as an adult their youngest daughter speaks at least six languages.

When Rosemary was five years old, her parents packed up her things and took Rosemary across town to live with their oldest child, Martha, who was newly married. Although this type of arrangement is not part of Ugandan culture, it appears that it made sense for their family. Martha treated Rosemary like her first child, and in many ways, Rosemary regarded her oldest sister as another mother. About a year after Rosemary went to live with her, Martha gave birth to the first of her eight children. So as Rosemary grew older, she naturally learned parenting skills and sharpened her intrinsic maternal instinct while helping to care for her nieces and nephews.

In a very practical way, this upbringing helped Rosemary develop and cultivate the mothering spirit that has become the marker of Sister Rosemary's religious vocation and ministry. In fact, she believes that taking care of Martha's children also helped her discern her vocation. "I felt I really developed a connection with my nieces and nephews, and that was all that really became a part of my life. When I heard about sisters who came from Sudan and made their ministry caring for children and orphans, I felt it was the right place for me to be."

Perhaps the hardest thing for Rosemary to get used to when she moved out of her parents' house was adjusting to sleeping without siblings in the same hut. She took care of this by talking to herself at night, affirming herself over and over, "Yes, I can do this." During the time she lived with Martha, Rosemary followed her sister's rules—but with her own interpretation. Once when Martha bought a uniform for Rosemary in grade school that she disliked, for example, Rosemary tried to wear it out to get rid of it, first by tearing it with her hands and, ultimately, by using a razor blade to slice and cut the fabric. When Martha questioned Rosemary about it, Rosemary simply nodded. In truth, she felt more proud of herself than guilty, knowing that she would never have to wear the ugly dress uniform again.

In the grace that comes from God's attention to detail, even the stubbornness and willfulness that has been a part of Rosemary's temperament since her childhood has served her well in adulthood, particularly as she dealt with major issues as the woman in charge of her religious community. Even the internal pep talks that as a little girl kept Rosemary lighthearted and able to shrug off anxiety or worry became ultimately a blessed asset when she needed to respond in obedience to her superiors or face a life-threatening situation. As Sabina repeatedly teased her youngest daughter,

“It’s hard for me to know when you’re angry, Rosemary, because you laugh even when things are tough!”<sup>3</sup>

According to Sister Rosemary, Martha had also told their parents that she wanted to join a religious order, but Sabina and Martino did not approve. “I understand why they didn’t want their first daughter to go,” Sister Rosemary recalls. “She was trained as a teacher and at that time my parents didn’t have a lot of money to educate all the children. So they said to her, ‘Now that you’re educated, you have to educate the others.’ By the time they got to me,” however, she adds laughing, “there was no opposing my religious vocation!”

## **A Very African Catholic Church**

The Catholic faith arrived in northern Uganda thanks to Italian Father Daniel Comboni, whose vocation from an early age called him to become a priest and a missionary to Africa. In 1864, just ten years after becoming a priest, Father Comboni launched a project designed not only to proclaim the Gospel throughout the African continent, but also to prepare Africans to evangelize their own people. “Save Africa with Africa,” Father Comboni’s motto, was nothing less than a revolutionary idea at that time. Three years later, at age thirty-six, Father Comboni founded the Missionary Institute for men (Sons of the Sacred Heart of Jesus), and in 1872, he founded the Missionary Sisters—the community that Rosemary would one day join. Father Comboni was named the first bishop of central Africa in 1877, with his vicariate based in Khartoum, Sudan, where he died four years later. To put it in historical perspective, Comboni’s vision for Africa originated over twenty years before Uganda began its seventy years of British rule as a British protectorate, in 1894.

The Mahdist War prevented Father Comboni from carrying out his project in Uganda, and in 1878, Pope Leo XIII entrusted the area of sub-Saharan Africa to the French cardinal Charles Lavigerie, archbishop of Algiers and Carthage, and to his society, the White Fathers, a name taken from the color of their long tunics. The first institute of women religious was founded in 1878, when Archbishop Lavigerie founded the Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Africa (or White Sisters) to serve side by side with the White Fathers in Uganda, Tanzania, Zambia, and Algiers—with the White Fathers landing near what is now Entebbe, on Lake Victoria, founding a Catholic mission in 1879. In Uganda, the White Sisters settled at Rubaga in 1899. It wasn't until 1920, more than thirty years after Bishop Comboni's death, that his successor personally guided the first group of Comboni Missionaries among the Alur, coming from Sudan to northern Uganda along the course of the Nile. Often referred to in Uganda as the Verona Fathers, since that's where the head office of their community is located, the Comboni Missionaries opened their northern Uganda mission among the Acholi in Gulu in 1921.

But evangelization and the spread of the Gospel did not come without sacrifice. In 1879, King Mutesa of the Bugandan kingdom (modern-day southern Uganda)—the largest and most powerful of all the tribes—allowed his subjects to choose among all the faiths, including Christianity. In *Butler's Lives of the Saints*, he is described as a “not unfriendly ruler” to the Christian missionaries, and for a time, the missions flourished.

However, after King Mutesa's twenty-four-year reign ended with his death in 1884, his eighteen-year-old son Mwanga became king, a man known for his corruption and for being a practicing pedophile. When the young pages at

the palace who had converted to Christianity began to reject his sexual advances, King Mwanga became furious. Over time, he was easily persuaded that Christianity caused the ancestors to be angry at the desertion of the old ways—and he began to eliminate Christianity from the kingdom, persecuting missionaries and the new Christians. A year into his reign, King Mwanga had three Baganda Anglicans dismembered and their bodies burned. Later that same year, the newly arrived Anglican bishop was murdered on Mwanga's orders.

King Mwanga's master of the pages was a Catholic man named Joseph Mukasa, who catechized the younger pages and protected them from the king. He was seized on a pretext and beheaded on November 15, 1885—becoming the first of the black Catholic martyrs on the continent. That same night, twenty-five-year-old Charles Lwanga and some of the other pages went to the White Fathers and asked to be baptized. A few months later, when King Mwanga became aware that the boys were still receiving Christian instruction, he commanded all the pages to appear and then ordered the Christians to be separated. When asked if they intended to remain Christian, fifteen boys and young men between the ages of thirteen and twenty-five said yes, including Charles Lwanga and Kizito, the youngest of the pages. King Mwanga's response was immediate, "Then you shall all burn!"

The boys were bound together and taken to Namugongo, a two-day walk, where they were imprisoned for seven days before being burned at the stake on June 3, 1886, on the feast of the Ascension. King Mwanga continued to torture and murder Christians for several years until he was overthrown by a rebellion. But Mwanga's savagery and the witness of the martyrs ignited an increase in the number of

Christian believers, with an estimated 10,000 Christians in the Buganda kingdom by 1890.<sup>4</sup> In all, twenty-two Catholics and twenty-four Anglican martyrs were killed around that time at Namugongo. Pope Benedict XV recognized the martyrdom of the Catholics and beatified them in 1920. On October 18, 1964, Pope Paul VI canonized all twenty-two of the Catholic martyrs. Five years later he made a pilgrimage to Namugongo, the site of their martyrdom, becoming the first pope to ever visit the African continent.

Two Ugandan martyrs, Daudi Okelo and Jildo Irwa, stand out to Catholics in northern Uganda because these two catechists were members of the Acholi tribe. The teenager Daudi and twelve-year-old Jildo were killed in 1918. After Daudi was killed, Jildo, in tears, said, "We have done nothing wrong. . . . For the same reason you killed Daudi you must also kill me, because together we came here and together we have been teaching God's word." They were beatified by St. Pope John Paul II in 2002 and are still remembered and honored by the local church and missionaries, but in particular by the Combonis whose ministry has been directly with the northern tribes. Father Comboni's was a plan "for the regeneration of Africa by recognizing the dignity and gifts God has given to the people of this continent," explained Father Christian Carlassare, Comboni Missionaries of the Heart of Jesus, vice provincial of South Sudan, at the Mass celebrating the 150th anniversary of Father Comboni's founding of the Institute. "We celebrate this anniversary with gratitude to the Lord for his mercy and compassion for Africa and for his Spirit who lead the Church to finally gain this 'precious black pearl/Africa' as it was called by St Daniel Comboni." Concluding, Father Carlassare added, "And I personally see that the Institute has still a mission ahead at the service of the Universal

Church on the field of first evangelization (in Africa and in the world).”<sup>5</sup>

Uganda’s Catholic roots remain, even now, deep in the country’s heart. According to a 2011 report on global Christianity by the Pew Research Center, Uganda has 14,100,000 Catholics—that’s equivalent to 42.2 percent of the population.<sup>6</sup> The report estimates that around one in five sub-Saharan Africans belonged to the Catholic Church in 2010. And while it is true that the world’s Catholic population has grown impressively (by 57 percent) since 1980, according to a 2015 Georgetown University CARA (Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate) report,<sup>7</sup> Africa’s Catholic population has more than tripled during that time, approaching 200 million. The report predicts that by 2040, almost one in four Africans will be Catholic, putting the continent’s total Catholic population at 460.4 million. In the words of Archbishop John Baptist Odama, head of Uganda’s conference of Catholic bishops, “The Church has been a mother [to the African people]. . . . It has been with the people in all their initial stages of life and in their critical conditions.”<sup>8</sup>

## **Leaving Everything Familiar Behind**

Rosemary’s parents called her back to live with them when she was thirteen years old. In the early 1970s, as teenager Rosemary was discerning what she wanted to do with her life, she made time to pray in the mornings at her parish church, just up the red dirt street from her home. The Paidha parish church of Mary Immaculate has a special place in Sister Rosemary’s heart. Her grandparents donated the land where the church was built, and her carpenter father made the doors to the church building. From an early

age, Rosemary learned from her family a dedication to daily prayer, to each other as family, and to service through the local parish church. Every night, her family prayed together. And it was her older brothers who taught Rosemary how to pray the rosary, a practice that remains part of her daily routine. Then, as she considered and pondered what it would look like to answer the increasing desire in her heart to do more for God, Rosemary heard about a community of missionary sisters from neighboring Sudan who had a special ministry to the poor and the orphaned, the Comboni Missionary Sisters.

“It’s difficult to trace an exact moment because I always say that I do think God calls all of us according to how we are created, or how we listen to his voice,” says Sister Rosemary. “The sisters would come to speak to us as young girls, telling us about different congregations and societies and the role of vocation. They used to tell us that if you want to listen to God . . . God can call you to different things, call you to marriage, call you to be a teacher, a doctor, anything—but you have to pray and ask, ‘God give me the right call,’ and so I did! I heard the right call, and I heard it young!—to the Comboni Sisters.

“I had just turned fifteen when I went! It was very, very early,” remembers Sister Rosemary, confessing that “[the sisters] did not know I was that young. The group I entered with was older than me, and I did everything with them,” so the sisters simply assumed that Rosemary was older.

Although both her mother and father accepted Rosemary’s decision to leave for the convent, it was not the same for her brother Valerio, who had gone to the seminary for a short time before discerning that was not his calling. “He said to me, ‘I don’t think you have a vocation.’ He was so opposed that the evening before I was supposed to leave for

the convent, he locked the door with all my things inside the house. When my dad came home from work, I told him that I was supposed to go to Napere to meet the sisters who were taking me to the convent but that I didn't have my things so I couldn't go. My father just said, 'That's not a problem. I have a hammer. I'll break a window! You go in and get your things.' So he did! I went to the convent through a window," she says with a laugh.

### **Life in Community**

Sister Rosemary first came to know of the Italian Comboni Missionary Sisters through her sister Martha, who taught at their school in nearby Napere. "I was scared of them because when I was a child they had given me injections when I was sick," remembers Rosemary with a laugh. "I did not like the white sisters for that!" Yet, she confesses, she was also "attached to them," attached enough and attracted to their charism enough to enter as an aspirant at the age of fifteen. "The Comboni sisters came to Uganda as refugees from Sudan," says Sister Rosemary, adding that the missionaries always planned to go back. Instead, their motherhouse in Juba, South Sudan, has been destroyed twice.

There were many things about Rosemary's new life at the Uganda motherhouse in Moyo that surprised her, and a good number of them that challenged her. In addition to being away from any and all members of her family, Rosemary had never lived in a home without any men. Also, although she looked older than her age, Rosemary was the youngest woman at the convent. "We started as aspirants from one to three years," she explains, "depending on your capability, how you coped with the new life, and how well you understood what was being taught. I was an aspirant

for one year,” followed by one or two years of postulancy. Rosemary, who was dedicated and driven, was a postulant for one year. The final stage was two years in the novitiate before making their final vows. “They never asked my age, so I made my final vows at nineteen, which I should not have done,” says Sister Rosemary, explaining that canon law required that a novice be twenty years old before making final vows. “After I took the vows, Mother said to me, ‘Rosemary, we just realized you took the vows before the right age,’ but by then they are not reversible,” Sister Rosemary adds, grinning.

When Rosemary became an aspirant, the mother superior to the Comboni Missionary sisters was Mother Elizabeth Coggi, who served as superior general from 1963 to 1976. Those were years of learning and growing on many levels and in many areas—especially for a young teenager like Rosemary. “At that time we had few sisters who were educated and prepared to run activities that had been run by the Italian sisters. I had a lot of intuition and was very practical,” explains Sister Rosemary. “I learned quickly many things. This mother superior, Elizabeth, she knew that I was very young, but she recognized my potential. I don’t know why, but she liked taking me with her! And she liked sending me to do things,” often things Rosemary could learn under the Italian Comboni sisters, from learning how to iron to how to bake.

“I knew nothing,” Sister Rosemary admits. “I was just a village girl. But I was willing to learn.” It was Mother Elizabeth who talked Sister Rosemary into finally cutting her hair, something that was very hard for Rosemary, who had been praised in her younger years for her beautiful tresses. “She talked me into it by saying that I’d be a distraction during prayers—and promising that it would not be

too short. It took me a long time to get used to that short hair!” She remembers one time when Mother Elizabeth handed Rosemary her habit and asked her to iron it. “I did my best, but then I said, ‘Mother, I’m sorry. I have never ironed a dress for a sister before.’ She said to me, ‘Rosemary, I take it you did your best—yes? Then I like it.’ Her attitude made me want to learn how to really iron so that I’d be ready if she asked me again! They were small, small things—but she took an interest in me!” Rosemary became so good at baking that she was the only girl chosen to travel to an Italian convent to study the art of baking from the nuns.

But Rosemary did not always like her assignments, or even do them. When assigned to take care of the dogs in the convent, Rosemary panicked. Not only did she not have dogs growing up, family lore prohibited anyone in the family from caring for dogs. “I hated the dogs. We were not allowed to have dogs. My mother and father told us that if anyone in our family line was involved in taking care of dogs, it would be a curse, a bad omen—and someone would die.”

The fear of dogs began when one of Rosemary’s uncles died. His dog loved the man so much that when they took his body away, the dog jumped in to be with him. “That’s when my grandfather declared, ‘It’s a bad omen for a dog to jump on a dead body. From now on, nobody in our family line must care for dogs.’ So of course, I go to the convent and it’s the first big job they give me!”

In truth, “I considered trying to explain all this to the sisters but decided instead to just not go to the dogs,” Sister Rosemary remembers. After several days, Mother Elizabeth found the hungry dogs and she walked straight into the building where the young women were studying, searching for the culprit. “We could hear her yelling from outside, ‘Who is in charge of the dogs?’—and the other girls got

frightened and turned to me, 'Rosemary, you better go and answer!' So I finally did. Mother looked at me and asked,

"Rosemary, when did you last eat?"

"I answered, 'I eat every day, Mother.'

"And when did you last feed the dogs?"

"But, Mother, I'm afraid of going there!"

"She scolded me in front of everybody. She was tough on me," recalls Sister Rosemary. "But I wasn't going to tell her my real reason! So I went and started to take care of the dogs. I learned." As time passed, Rosemary got in trouble again when assigned to the dogs, but this time it was because she wanted to bake biscuits for them or take towels from the convent for their bedding. "I did, it's true. . . . I started loving the dogs!"

Mother Elizabeth was such an important role model for Rosemary that, in 1989, when Sister Rosemary started a vocational training group to teach the women in Moyo to read and write, she named it Saint Elizabeth Women's Group. What is undeniable is the great impact the Italian Comboni sisters had on Sister's Rosemary's spirit. In addition to demonstrating their dedication to prayer, the sisters modeled for her what it means to be a teacher, a mentor, and a leader: the insistence on excellence; instilling respect for herself and others; an understanding of responsibility; encouraging development of potential—all traits that Sister Rosemary was able to adapt and implement years later in her work with the girls at St. Monica's.

Mother Elizabeth's assistant superior was Sister Annetta Rose Yunit, who went on to become the first African superior general in 1976, the same year that Sister Rosemary took her final vows. "Mother Elizabeth was the last one. I had just become a new sister. I had just taken my vows!" Mother Annetta, the assistant superior, was also the person

who led a handful of women as the community transitioned officially, leaving the Comboni congregation to start an African community, the Sacred Heart of Jesus Sisters. They now count over three hundred women in Sudan; Nairobi, Kenya; Uganda; and Phoenix, Arizona, the first community in the United States. “Mother Annetta was so, so good,” Sister Rosemary recalls. “She was so prayerful! She also had poor health for a long time. She was delicate.” Mother Annetta died in 1979. She was followed by Mother Theresina Ihure, who served as second superior general until 1994.

Sister Doreen Oyella, who entered the convent at the much older age of eighteen, has known Sister Rosemary since those early years in the convent, before either of them had become sisters—although Sister Rosemary is quick to point out that although they are the same age, Sister Rosemary is “much ahead of [Sister Doreen] in religious vocation. I entered earlier.” After a lifetime of “growing up together” and forty-one years as Sacred Heart Sisters, the two women have endless stories of their work, and they laugh often telling those stories. After all these decades in the convent, notes Sister Doreen, “We must have done something right. Nothing comes from nothing,” she says with a smile, quoting a song from the musical *The Sound of Music*, a favorite of both of women.

Looking back at those first few years in community, when they were both so young, the women say the difficulties they faced were very real, even if a bit childlike. For Doreen, it was the calm atmosphere and the order of it all. “I’m very lively, and I like running! I had a hard time when I first joined. You are supposed to walk s-l-o-w-l-y, gently, learn humility that way. I was very stubborn!”

But for Rosemary it was more about her candor. As the priest who led spiritual formation told her, “Rosemary, you

are very frank, and you are as you are. You will be in trouble many times!”

Ultimately, the tales of those years tell a story of two young women who did not know how much they didn't know until they went to the convent in Moyo. Yet it was their heart that each of them followed. Today, they are in awe at the place where God has brought them, and at the fact they are still together! As Sister Rosemary notes, “Friendship is such an important thing.” Observation makes it abundantly clear how important humor is for both women, especially in light of the many critical and major events that they have faced together.

“I'm going to use some of the money from my latest speech for a storehouse/room,” Sister Rosemary says to her old friend, Sister Doreen.

“Thank you for your generosity,” Sister Doreen jokes with a straight smile, as she passes her friend a plate of sliced papaya. And they both laugh. “Divine Providence, Sister. Holy Providence of God, help us,” Sister Doreen adds.

“That doesn't make sense,” Rosemary immediately quips back. “I don't see how Holy Providence can help you. If it's God the Father who is provident, who is going to help you? Father Most Provident, help us. That is faith. . . . That's why we say, ‘Holy Providence of God help us’ fifty time every day.”

“I do it thirty,” Doreen retorts back, confessing.

“That's a shortcut!” Rosemary exclaims, then laughs and laughs.

One is a “woman of night” and the other a “woman of morning,” making it hard for the two friends to do something as simple as watch a movie together when they are both in Gulu. But they both agree on the importance of their communal, common prayer—something the Sacred Heart

Sisters do together daily whether there are two or ten sisters available for morning and evening prayer.

“There are people who get up early and start reading. I can’t do that. I have to read in the evening and sleep with it,” explains Sister Rosemary. “Another thing that puts me to bed is the rosary. Have you ever finished a rosary in your bed?” she says, turning to look at her friend of forty-four years. “I start many rosaries,” says Sister Rosemary with a laugh. “My rosary goes everywhere with me. A good place to sit and pray is under the mango tree.”

“That *is* a good place,” Sister Doreen nods, suddenly turning serious. “Rosemary,” she pauses, “you have a motherly heart.”

## Outside the Convent’s Walls, Trouble Brews

Uganda became an independent country in 1962, with Apollo Milton Obote as prime minister and Buganda’s King Mutesa as president. In 1966, Obote seized power in a coup, ending the autonomy of the Buganda kingdom, abolishing other Ugandan tribal kingdoms—and promoting himself to the presidency. But in 1971, the same year that Sister Rosemary entered the convent, Ugandan armed forces commander Idi Amin Dada Oumee overthrew the government of Obote in a military coup and shortly thereafter declared himself president of Uganda, for life.

Amin, a member of the Kakwa tribe who was also a Muslim, was a violent ruler and an egomaniac who recruited many followers from his own ethnic group. When Britain broke diplomatic relations with Uganda, for example, Amin declared that he had defeated the British and added “CBE” (Conqueror of the British Empire) to his title—making his entire title “His Excellency President for Life, Field Marshal Alhaji Dr. Idi Amin Dada, VC, DSO, MC, CBE.”

Amin's wrath fell upon vast numbers—ethnic groups, religious leaders, journalists, artists, intellectuals, foreign nationals, and others. He also ordered mass executions of Acholi and Lango ethnic people, as well as Christian tribes that had been traditionally loyal to Obote. By early 1972, approximately 5,000 Acholi and Lango soldiers, and at least twice as many civilians, had disappeared. That same year, Amin issued a decree ordering the expulsion of 60,000 Asians who were not Ugandan citizens. The spree of killings that Amin pursued were broadly motivated by ethnic, political, and financial factors. Although the exact number of people killed throughout his eight years in control is unknown, the International Commission of Jurists estimated the death toll at no fewer than 80,000 and more likely around 300,000. An estimate compiled by Amnesty International, however, estimates the number to be as high as 500,000.<sup>9</sup>

From 1971 until 1979, when Amin was finally ousted from power by Tanzanian troops, Amin's reign of violence and viciousness permeated Uganda. People would simply disappear, their bodies dumped savagely into the Nile River. US Ambassador Thomas Patrick Melady recommended as early as 1973 that the United States reduce its presence in Uganda. After he described Amin's regime as "racist, erratic and unpredictable, brutal, inept, bellicose, irrational, ridiculous, and militaristic," the US finally closed its embassy in Kampala.<sup>10</sup>

During these years, and almost exactly in a parallel timeline, Rosemary Nyirumbe was an aspirant, postulant, novice, and a newly vowed still-in-training Sacred Heart of Jesus Sister, keeping her somewhat sheltered from the horrors taking place—or at least, keeping her from being directly impacted. But in the late 1970s everything was about to change.