

## **To the Memory of Monica – forever young.**

This morning the memory of Sr. Monica Beebwa came so vividly to my mind. I write a few words about her life and her death in order to honour the memory of a beautiful woman and a wonderful DMJ.

I remember the Monica who studied in Maryhill as a student. I taught her English language and literature. She was bright, beautiful, pleasant and a joy to have in the school. I remember one particular one day when her mother Sophie visited the community. Monica came from school to be close to her and I remember her cooking something that her Mum would enjoy eating. There was a tenderness about the way she cared for her Mother. This was shortly before her Mother died.

Monica studied at Makerere and on completion of her degree applied to join us, following in the footsteps of her older sister. It is a feat for anyone to go through University and still adhere to a sense of call to a vowed life. Not many survive that environment but Monica did.

She had great social skills and was very popular. She was attractive and likeable and had multitudes of friends. As someone put it once: she had 'good blood'. I remember her having a kind of innate knowing. She had insight and intuition and a gleam in her eye that could communicate much left unsaid in words. She had a great sense of humour. She had a clear potential for leadership and wasn't afraid to speak her mind and raise the thorny questions. She could do that with clarity and without aggression. Many of you reading this will have known Monica more intimately and of course, who knew her better and from infancy than her sister, Josephine?

On Tuesday August 23<sup>rd</sup> 1988 I was in the Bethany community with Josephine and Adeodata. About 9am Felicé arrived at the end door linking/supporting Liz who was weak and distressed. 'Monica is dead', they said, 'she was shot last night in Kabale'. Liz had taken the phone call from the Bishop's secretary and was reeling with shock. It was surreal. Immediately I went into cautious mode (and denial)... did Liz hear correctly? We must try to re-connect with Kabale to verify that the correct message had been heard. The most urgent thing was to break the news to Josephine, Monica's sister, who was in her bedroom. Jo was told the unspeakable news.

Efforts at reconnecting by phone to Kabale initially failed but eventually a link was made which served to confirm the first message. Indeed Monica was dead. Liz McCarthy was part of the Kabale community and had spent the night in Mbarara on her return from home leave. She was destined to return to Kabale on the morning that the awful news reached us.

We got thorough on the phone to the Sacred Heart Sisters in Kampala and charged them with informing our General Team in Rome. Someone put a message on the 'radio call' for our sisters in Karamoja to be told. Agnès Charles (whose niece and nephew were visiting at the time) drove to Ibanda to inform the Ibanda and Bisheshe communities. Someone went to the nearby village to tell Agatha, the sister of Jo and Monica. Monica and Agatha were close in age and close in relationship. Bishop Kakubi put a minibus and driver at our

disposal, cautioning us not to drive. We prayed on the way dreading what lay ahead. I have a memory of Liz leading us in a litany to Our Lady. One particular phrase stood out: 'Comforter of the afflicted. Pray for us.' It couldn't have been more apt.

One car had gone on ahead of the minibus with Jo and Diane and some others. As we arrived in Kabale in the minibus we pulled in to a petrol station for fuel. Still disbelieving- or unable to grasp the reality- we asked the attendant: 'Is it true that someone was killed on Rushoroza last night?' 'Yes,' he replied. 'It was a sister.' We found Monica's body reposing in the house and a shocked but composed Mary Rose who told us the story of what had happened. The previous night the house was surrounded by men/robbers. Monica heard them and called Mary Rose. 'We are surrounded', she said. Together they went to the small chapel whose window was in the direction of the Seminary, the nearest occupied building. The intention was to call for help. Monica began to ululate/sound an alarm for help. A gun was pointed through the window and a shot rang out, pierced Monica through the heart, exited her body and went through Mary Rose's arm. Mary Rose tried to lower Monica's body to the ground to break the fall. Monica lay on the floor of the chapel and bled to death while Mary Rose tried to assist her. It was some time later that Mary Rose realised that she herself had been shot.

The door of the house was broken open and the men entered demanding money. Mary Rose's hand trembled as she tried in the dark to light the paraffin lamp. In relating this part of the story Mary Rose always said that she had a sense of a shield of protection around her and the sense that she would not be harmed despite the hostility of the intruders. It was a spiritual experience for her. They left having rifled the house and found a mere \$10. Alone now, Mary Rose groped in the dark and made her way down the path to the seminary to call for help. The priests from the seminary accompanied her back to the house and together they faced the devastation. Mary Rose told us that at some point she fetched a basin of water and knelt down as she mopped up Monica's blood from the chapel floor. When we arrived in the house there was a vase of white lilies in front of the tabernacle and my sense is that they were there throughout the awful event.

During that day people gathered and rallied around to help. I remember Monica's father, Luka Beebwa. I can picture him as he sat at the side of his daughter's coffin with such immense dignity and stoicism. Though deeply pained, he had a rock-like strength. He drew from a deep source of faith and courage. There were no recriminations from his lips.

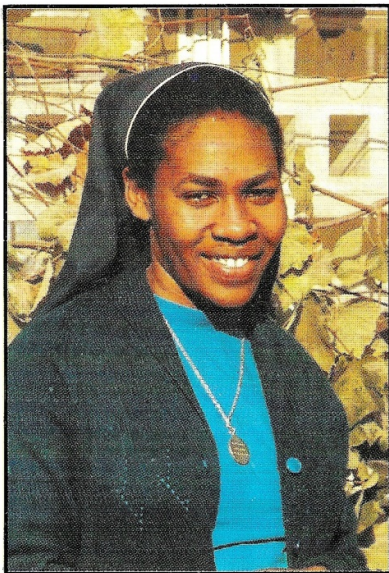
Bit by bit over that first day the sisters and the friends gathered. My memory of that night in the small house at Nyakakiika is that we hovered between shocked numbness/ silence and barely contained hysteria. In one of the bedrooms we sat in a line along a bed with our backs against the wall (for a place to sit). At one point Bridie Doherty took a leap from the bed saying she had seen a mouse. That was enough to release a wave of tension and we all laughed hysterically. Then the silence enveloped us. Pat Akisa found a table-top and stretched her body on it to make a bed for a few hours. If anyone slept, it was very little. There was no place to lie down even if we were inclined to sleep. We sat, prayed and kept vigil and tried to come to grips with what had happened so unexpectedly. After all, we were ostensibly in peace times. The Amin years were over.

Next day there was a Mass for Monica in the Cathedral at Rushoroza. I went ahead to Mbarara to see to arrangements there. I met Bishop Kakubi who had issued a message to the people that there would be the Mass and burial of Monica that day. He was not happy with me when I said: 'It can't happen. We have to have her in the house tonight.' The Mass was deferred to next day.

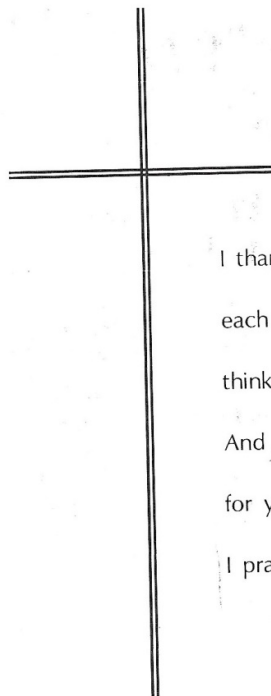
Later that day Monica's remains arrived at the community in Mbarara. She reposed in what was originally the chapel of the community and by then had become a multi-purpose room. The coffin was placed in the centre of the room with chairs around. A profusion of white flowers surrounded her. Bougainvillea, lilies, daisies- fresh, white flowers...

A couple of other memories: A fire was lit in the middle of the compound. It burned for 4 nights as was the tradition. It was regularly fuelled with wood - a big fire around which people sat, told stories, remembered, had a drink. It was the traditional way to mark the death of a loved one- what wisdom, community, solidarity.

Then when the time came for the burial, we left the Cathedral in procession led by Monica's brother, John, who played the guitar and led us in hymn-singing as we walked along the path to the cemetery accompanying Monica to her place of rest.



We remember with love  
Sr. Monica Tumusiime Beebwa  
Daughter of Mary and Joseph  
born into eternal life  
22nd August, 1988  
Aged 31 years



I thank my God  
each time I  
think of you.  
And when I pray  
for you  
I pray with joy.

Phil. 1:3

Monica, forever young in our hearts.

For all of us we lost a beloved sister and community member. For Josephine she lost, in addition, a sister who shared her own flesh and blood. For Mary Rose- she lived through an incredibly traumatic experience.

Monica's full name was: Monica Tumusiime Beebwa. Tumusiime= We thank Him (God). Our Gaba house has a name on the gate: Tumusiime House.

As those memories came to me this morning I thought: It is painful to revisit tragedy and surface the memories and in order to cope we do compartmentalise. Yet, when we do dare to open that box we find there is a place where the wound and the tears are still fresh.

Helen Lane.