

By Thomas Kagera,

For the first time in her long history, the Rwanda Catholic Church has a Cardinal. His Eminence Cardinal Antoine Kambanda, along with twelve others, was officially created Cardinal by Pope Francis on 28th November 2020 during a consistory in Vatican. He celebrated his first mass on 6th December at Kigali Arena, attracting several celebrants including President Paul Kagame, bishops from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, diplomats accredited to Rwanda and representatives of different faith based organizations, among others.

The ascendance of Cardinal Kambanda to one of the topmost positions in the Catholic Church is a symbolic representation of Rwanda's positioning in the religious world, where the church can be represented during the election of the next Pope. It is also a show of trust and confidence the Holy See has in the Rwanda Catholic Church, and the people of Rwanda in general.

Show of Trust



President Kagame explicitly appreciates this show of trust and confidence in the Rwanda Roman Catholic Church and Rwandans.

"Today, all of us Rwandans have great joy because the Catholic Church of Rwanda has a Cardinal. It's the first time this has happened in the last 120 years. When a Rwandan rises through the ranks because of his or her proven courage and commendable performance, be it in Rwanda or on the international stage, we are all happy. The trust and dignity that the Pope has given you is also ours as Rwandans," the President considered.

International Relations

In terms of international relations, Rwanda-Vatican relations which heretofore were poor owing to the church's refusal to acknowledge participation of its clergy in the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi are steadily evolving into normalcy. Since Pope Francis ascendance to the Holy Seat, there has been good progress towards mending the same with clear demonstration on the Pope's side, relentlessly proving commitment to boosting relations and correcting what went wrong over the past.

Considering the involvement of Catholic Church members during the genocide,

Pope Francis made a step further and apologized on behalf of the church. The appointment of Cardinal Kambanda will cement the relationship even further. Monsignor Kambanda also has to demonstrate continued efforts to restore the faith that Rwandans lost in the church owing to its failings during the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi.

Building body and spirit

Despite the downs that befell the church when its members participated in the heinous acts, the long and rich history of Rwanda shows that the Catholic Church has been a partner in improving the wellbeing of Rwandans through education, health, and development.

That is why President Kagame concurs when he emphasizes that the willingness of Pope Francis is promising for collaboration to draw special attention on good deeds and leave behind the evil past.

The upbeat resonates through a number of eminent Rwandans that have hope in Cardinal Kambanda's elevation. The President of Rwanda Episcopal Conference, Bishop Philippe Rukamba says the church is proud of the milestone.

"His Eminence the Cardinal, you are adding another bloc to a long sequence of Christians and clerics Rwanda has ever had," says Rukamba.

His brief history

Monsignor Kambanda was born on 10th November 1958 in Kigali. He attended Primary school in Burundi and Uganda and continued with secondary school studies in Kenya. He graduated in theology at Grand Seminaire Nyakibanda in Butare Diocese.

Most of the members of his family were killed in the 1994 war except for one of his brothers, who at present lives in Italy.

After his Ordination, the Cardinal-designate held a number of offices.

From 1990 to 1993 he was Professor and Prefect at the Minor Seminary of Ndera (Kigali), before taking up higher studies again in Rome from 1993 to 1999, at the Redemptorists' Alphonsian Academy — whose teaching is inspired by Saint Alphonsus Mary Liguori —, where he received a Doctorate in Moral Theology. He

resided at Saint Paul's Pontifical College.

He was Director of Kigali's diocesan Caritas from 1999 to 2005; Director of the diocesan Justice and Peace Commission; Professor of Moral Theology at the Grand Seminary of Theology at Nyakibanda and Spiritual Director of the Grand Seminary of Rutongo, in the province of Kigali.

Then, from 2005 to 2006 he was Rector of the Grand Seminary of Philosophy of Kabgayi, in the Southern Province. From 2006 he was Rector of the Saint Charles Grand Seminary of Nyakibanda.

Pope Francis appointed him Bishop of the diocese of Kibungo on May 7, 2016, and Archbishop of Kigali on November 19, 2018.