

# Church hides Rwandan priest in Tuscany

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## **Catholic hierarchy in Italy helps war crimes suspect.**

Italy's Roman Catholic church yesterday spirited into hiding a Rwandan priest wanted by the international war crimes tribunal for allegedly murdering 2,500 parishioners during Rwanda's genocide.

Father Athanase Seromba vanished with the help of the Catholic hierarchy hours before he was due to say mass in San Mauro a Signa, a village outside Florence. Fr Seromba had promised to explain in a sermon why the UN Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) last week sought his extradition on genocide charges.

Parishioners packed the 16th-century church yesterday morning to hear his defence but learned he had gone into hiding at a secret location.

A spokesman for the diocese, Riccardo Bigi, said the hierarchy had provided a bolthole in Tuscany to help him escape media attention.

*"He has not run away. We know where he is, but would rather not say*

*where. He will spend a few days in peace to avoid curious journalists. I don't know when he will return", Mr Bigi said.*

The few days could stretch into a "holiday" of indeterminate duration, he added.

According to African Rights, a London-based human rights organisation, Fr Seromba, 38, participated in the 1994 extermination of 800,000 minority Tutsis by the ruling Hutu tribe. Survivors claim the priest, a Hutu, herded up to 2,500 Tutsi parishioners into his church at Nyange, before ordering two bulldozers to crush them in one of the genocide's most notorious bloodbaths.

The church moved him to Italy soon after, ostensibly to study, and under an assumed name he served as deputy parish priest at a church in Florence before moving 18 months ago to San Mauro a Signa.

Simultaneous raids in Belgium, Switzerland, and the Netherlands last week netted three Rwandans wanted

by the tribunal, which will try them at a UN court in Tanzania, but Italy refused to hand over a fourth suspect, who legal sources identified as Fr Seromba.

The tribunal's top prosecutor, Carla del Ponte, was furious : *"I am surprised and stupefied, because apparently Italy doesn't know that the obligation to execute our arrest warrant is an international obligation without need of an internal law"*.

Italy said it needed an ad hoc decree to cooperate, but Italian media suggested the real reason was pressure by the Vatican which has sought to play down its clergy's role in the massacres.

An article about foreign priests in yesterday's Toscana Oggi, a Catholic newspaper, made no mention of Fr Seromba, but did refer to another Hutu colleague who fled to Italy after his family was allegedly killed by Tutsis. Fr Seromba, who now calls himself Fr Anastasio Sumba Bura, has denounced the accusations against him as politically motivated lies. He was

too upset to defend himself yesterday, said Mr Bigi.

The ailing parish priest he was sent to help, Fr Armido Pollai, 83, said mass in his place. From a glazed terracotta altar he related the story of the good samaritan, but made no reference to his colleague.

Parishioners praised the energy and cheerfulness of the small, plump African, who prepared their children for communion, heard confession and performed marriages. *"He is a lovely man; he stops in here for milk and honey in the morning before going to church. I don't believe he could have done such terrible things"*, said the owner of a café.

Most of those spilling into the sunshine after mass did not want to discuss the allegations. A local policeman, Vincenzo Forte, said they were nervous.

*"Everybody is worrying that if he is guilty the marriages and communions might turn out to be invalid. Where would that leave us?"*.