



VICKY'S JOURNEY: FROM SICKNESS AND DESPAIR TO A RESURRECTED LIFE



A story of HIV, Africa, and the NGO where she was given hope

with

Ms. VICKY ARYENYO

introduced by

Msgr. Lorenzo ALBACETE

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Genuard: Good evening. My name is Ken Genuard and as head of the New York Communion and Liberation community I'd like to thank you all for being here tonight, and I'd like to give a special thanks to Mario Paredes and the American Bible Society for hosting us here tonight, as well as the Crossroads Cultural Center for co-sponsoring this event.

We are very privileged to have with us Vicky Aryenyo and Dr. Luciana Bassani who came from Uganda to be with us tonight and tell us their incredible story. Without further delay I'll turn over the floor to Msgr. Lorenzo Albacete.

Albacete: In about two hours, the President of the United States will be addressing a joint session of Congress to explain his response to the current economic crisis. Many observers agree that the American people are afraid and confused about what is happening. The need for hope and change which the President had made the centerpiece of his campaign now faces him as President, as again and again people insist he must convince the people that we can overcome this economic collapse.

What does Christianity contribute to our society in this situation? Pope Benedict XVI insists repeatedly that indeed it is a matter of a hope that doesn't disappoint us. But upon what is this hope based?

The Holy Father's insistence harmonizes perfectly with that of the founder of our Movement Communion and Liberation. In fact, the text all of us are studying and verifying this year is devoted to the hope that Christianity makes possible, and how to witness to it in our society. We are verifying that words are not enough, that it is not a matter of a discourse, that inspiration is not sufficient, that indeed it is not a question of spirituality at all. Our hope is based on the fact of an event, an encounter with someone that makes all things truly new in this world, in our time, in our experience, and in our lives. Only this way is our faith truly reasonable for everyone, believer or not. Therefore, rather than offer an intellectual explanation of the hope born from our faith, we are anxious to offer to you a concrete fact, a person we have encountered, in whom we have recognized the dynamics of our hope taking absolutely serious all the circumstances of our present situation. That is why we are so happy we can offer to you her witness precisely tonight as the President addresses our nation.

Bassani: Good evening, everybody. I'm very happy to accompany Vicky on her trip. In five minutes I just want to tell you what the Meeting Point is. It started in 1990 and it started out of a deep, deep friendship. A friend of ours, Rosa Cumu, a very close friend of my family, got sick with HIV/AIDS. Because we were very, very great friends, we wanted to accompany her in her destiny to the last day of her life and we started to go visit other friends that little by little we discovered had been sick because at that time HIV/AIDS was something that was not accepted by people. People felt stigmatized and couldn't say, "I'm sick with..." or "I have someone at home

who is sick with HIV/AIDS.” But she, with the courage we were sharing with her got the courage to offer her free time, break time at lunch, to meet people who had friends or relatives or who were themselves sick with AIDS. She offered her time to talk and show them that life is still valuable; life can be meaningful if someone is with you and bears with you. So she started giving time just to go and see friends, and little by little this created friendship which grew and in the end let’s say got organized in the sense that Rose Busingye, of whom Vicky will talk about a lot, and another friend started. Their organization was just a little car. And they were moving and seeing people at home and giving comfort, giving support... So Vicky entered our history because she met someone, as she will tell you. That’s all.

Albacete: Well Vicky, hi. You’re on.

Arynyo: Good evening ladies and gentlemen. I’m honored to be here this evening. I bring you greetings from Uganda, greetings from my family, and greetings from my other family of Meeting Point International. I’m honored by this invitation to come and share with you the journey of hope coupled with faith, as life is a journey.

I come from the eastern part of Uganda. Uganda is in Africa in the eastern part of Africa. I found myself born in the eastern part of that country where I lived with my parents until a certain age. There came a time when I was involved in a family where there was a broken marriage. My father had problems with my mother and I happened to be living with my mother—not because I desired to, but she was caring. My father did not care about my education, did not care about my well-being, and that was the opposite of my mother. She took care of me and my sister; we are only two. She took care of us right home and right in the school. I studied until I reached high school in senior four. Before I took my final exams in senior four, my mother had developed some sickness and that was the cancer of the breast. It was a very difficult time. That was in the year 1984.

So after my exams I had to drop out of school completely because there was nobody to support me in school, because then my mother had to go for treatment and that was the only source of income I had for my education. I dropped out of school so that I could take care of my mother and also look for ways of looking after my younger sister. So there I began a family.

Eventually, in 1988, my mother passed away, but in the year 1985 when I had dropped out of school, I had been to meet a family friend who took me to the city of Uganda that is Kampala where he found me some job. That was not sustaining. I had no other alternative. I couldn’t leave the job because I could not go back to school either and I had nothing else to do but to cling on to that job. At a certain point I was given a promotion into a better office where I worked for ten years, and that was in Mulago Hospital, the National Referral Hospital for Uganda.

As I had no more hope of going back to school, I decided to get married. Naturally I was growing and I had definitely to get married. I got married to my husband. We had two children. We lived with our children until 1992 when I had the third pregnancy. In my third pregnancy, a problem cropped up in my house; my husband was not interested in that pregnancy. He told me to terminate the pregnancy. I am of a Christian background, and I knew termination of that pregnancy meant killing a human person, so I refused to terminate that pregnancy. On top of that, he did not tell me the reasons why I should have the abortion. We had only two children and we were still a young couple. So I continued with the pregnancy, but he gave me two options—I either terminate the pregnancy and continue with the marriage, or I terminate the marriage and continue with pregnancy. I decided to continue with the pregnancy and definitely, obviously terminate the marriage, but I was not sure what this man was saying because I thought maybe he was joking because out of the blue he says he wants me to terminate the pregnancy. I came to realize at that point that he had had a relationship outside with another woman. So it consoled me. I knew that by the time I would give birth, the birth of my baby would get

back my husband into my house. But that was in vain. I came to confirm when I gave birth to this baby that he was not concerned about the family anymore.

I lived with my children since the year 1992 a single mother, but since I was working, I was able to sustain my family fully. I went on with life until 1996 when my boy, the little baby, developed a cough that was so persistent. I tried to give treatment of all kinds, but he could not respond. The doctor told me that maybe we could test and see whether he had developed tuberculosis, and indeed the results were positive. He had developed tuberculosis. I became so worried because I was working within the hospital and I knew tuberculosis was connected to some other problem. But then when I asked the doctors, “Why do you think my boy has developed tuberculosis?” as you just heard from Dr. Luciana, at that time the stigma against HIV was so high. And the doctors also could not open up to me. They told me, “Everybody has the bacteria of tuberculosis and at a certain point when your immunity goes down, the tuberculosis will always show up.” I asked them why the immunity of my child could have gone down, and nobody could explain to me.

In 1997, the following year, I developed a condition that was very painful; it’s called herpes zoster; it’s a condition that you also develop after either a stress or a low immunity; it’s a condition that affects a certain part of the body across with blisters that are so painful. When I developed that condition, it was another condition that when I added it to the tuberculosis of my son, worried me more.

After some time, my health started deteriorating, and because of that I could work no more. I lost my job. In 1998 I was at home with my children, and surely I collapsed completely. I found myself in the hospital, admitted. I was admitted for two weeks. But in the hospital they counseled me for an HIV test. I was so sick. They had already discovered I had tuberculosis as well, and I had no reason really to refuse to have an HIV test. I was in the hands of the doctors, so I consented and when the sample was taken after two days, they brought me the results, and the results were not pleasing. They told me the results were positive.

It was a very difficult time. I had nobody to share my heart with. I had nobody around to comfort me. But there was a condition on the ward that made me strong because whoever was coming to that ward, three-quarters of the patients who were admitted to that ward died. I prayed. I said, “God, if only you could get me out of this ward walking, that would be a miracle enough.” God was faithful.

I was able to be discharged after two weeks, but on arrival home there was another disaster. I found my son was totally sick. He was rushed to the hospital, and I told them to request also for an HIV test because then I wanted to sort out myself. And surely when they came back they told me his results were positive.

I am 43 years of age now, but in the 43 years, that was the most painful time I ever had in my life—to know that my child, innocent as he is, is carrying the cross he’s not supposed to carry. I cried to God. I said, “For God sake, what wrong has this kid done? If it is my mistake, God, I would have carried it all alone. If it is my sin, Lord, I would have carried it all alone. This is a child who was given up to death in the womb by his father. I protected him and brought him out into the world, but still death followed him outside.”

At that point, I had nobody to talk to. My condition worsened. I was carrying a double portion of pain—the pain of the child was on my body; the pain of my child was on my shoulders. I cried to God. I looked for death to come and sweep us, and death was very far away from us. I did not want to die and leave my son suffering, and I did not want to bury him. I could not stand the sight of burying my child and I didn’t want to die and leave him to suffer and die a painful death. I’d rather he dies in my hands, and I feared to bury my child. There was nothing I could see in my eyes, only a burial ground.

As I told you I lost my job, so did my friends go, so did my relatives go, so did everything in life leave me. I remained as Job was—naked the way I came and possibly naked the way I was going. I looked for death; death was very far. I cried to God, and God was quiet.

The only help my relatives could give was to hold a meeting and collect money to take me back to die in the village. And when they contacted me after they had collected the money, I refused to go. And they did not even bother to carry me and take me to the hospital. I lived with my three children. Grass was growing in front of our door. Why? Nobody could cross at our door. We would stay without water and food in my house for three or four days. I am in pain. I have no food. I have no medicine. I have no friend. I have no love. I have nobody to talk to. I lived in that condition since 1998. Until 2001, I was in that state. My children dropped out of school.

My son went to school at a certain time and his class teacher started calling him “skeleton.” He looked like a skeleton, but did they have to call him a skeleton? It became the song of the school. Whenever they would see him enter through the gate the children would start shouting, “Skeleton is coming! Skeleton has come!” And that tortured my child. He came and told me one day, and when I went I wanted to see the teacher; nobody cared. I was useless. Nobody could listen to me. I reached a state of hopelessness. I wanted to die, but death could not come. One thing I didn’t want to do was to kill myself, but I wanted death to come and take me, but death could not come near me.

In 200, some ladies visited my house some time. To cut the long story short, when they came, they found me as usual. They tried to talk to me, to give me the words of hope, to tell me there would be a place where they could help me. Maybe I would go and join Meeting Point International? There they help people who are sick. They do A, B, C. It was all rubbish! For sure these ladies were strangers. I have been having friends who were all around me. I have been having relatives. As I was working in the hospital, people would travel all the way, so many kilometers from my village, and my house was another ward. My door was open to everybody. I supported people’s children in school. I supported friends at my place of work, but at the time I needed them, nobody could even give me a smile. I became a problem; I became the greatest sinner. The only words they could speak to me were to condemn me. So when these ladies spoke to me, I was quiet because I couldn’t believe a stranger would come to my rescue. They came back to me many times. I think the neighbors told them. Whenever somebody died in that village, and people were looking for where the funeral is, they would first come to my door, and these are the words they would say, “Either the mother has died or the son has died.” We were in a death competition—whoever would die first.

I remember there was a day my child was dying on my lap. I had nothing to do. I couldn’t take him to the hospital. I had no strength to begin with. I had no money to take him to the hospital. As I was sitting on my bed, I saw him die. I cried. I told God, “Do something! Do one thing: Either you take us or you heal us—one of the two. If you don’t take us then you better heal us.” But God...as if God was moving...the more I spoke, the more silent God was.

At a certain time, after these ladies had come to me many times, they came with another lady. This lady was somebody I had never seen before. So when they came, they entered into my house. They found me sitting in my chair. I had a chair which was as long as this table. She came and sat beside me. And this lady was Rose, the director of Meeting Point International. It even made it worse. I knew these people had come to make a project out of me because this one I had never seen before, and why were they following me anyway? If they want to help me and I don’t want help, why are they following me? There must be an agenda behind. So when she came and sat beside me, friends, I had started dying when I was working. I died when I was alive because I myself could feel the smell within me. I was surely rotted. When I bent like this, you would see through my mouth would come pus; my nose, mixed with saliva mixed with whatever you can call it. The mucus that would come from my nose was mixed with pus, was mixed with blood, and the same from my mouth. My feet were stinking.

I was under God's mercy and I did not know what kept me from dying. Because I was not taking medicine, I was not eating, I was at God's mercy.

When she came and sat beside me I knew my condition—I was smelling. I kept on moving away from her; she kept on moving nearer to me until I reached the end of the chair and I could move nowhere. She looked at me. She began the same stories the other ladies were telling me. I was bored. I didn't want to hear. Then as they were leaving, she told me one thing, "If you do not want the support we are trying to give you, please give me this little boy; he has his own life to live." I was equally quiet.

Friends, I had no words. I had no words. I had only one prayer, "God, give me a second chance to live. I will serve you. God give me a second chance to live; I will testify to Your goodness. God give me a second chance to live. What this man has done to me and my child, I will not do it to anybody." But I did not know whichever way God would give me the second chance; I did not know, but I knew God would give me a second chance in whatever way.

When these people had gone away, these ladies kept on coming back. I don't know; the Grace of God is sometimes very strong in certain areas of life because these people followed me and followed me and followed me! They started taking my child. They would come, take my child, and bring him back; take him and bring him back. It was none of my concern. After all, they were not giving him anything. They were not giving him food. They were not giving him anything. They would take him, talk to him, he played with the rest of the children, and he would come back. I said, they are bothering my child.

Then one day I said, let me go and see where these people take my child. When I went, it was a short distance, it took me almost an hour because I would go walk, sit down, walk, sit down. Wherever I would pass, people were laughing. I reached Meeting Point International and fortunately for me I found those ladies. They were singing; they were dancing; they were happy; they were laughing. I said, I was right; these people want to make a project out of me. A sick person is like me; a sick person cannot sing; a sick person cannot laugh; a sick person cannot be happy; these women are not sick. I went back to my house. That marked the end. I never went back.

But one day the director sent for me because all along she was trying to look for a way of raising money to buy medicine for my son, so she sent for me because now she wanted to put him on medicine. They had to do a retroviral therapy. So when I went into her office, she gave me a seat before her. She asked me some questions, "Why don't you come up? Blah, blah, blah." She asked these questions. Then she told me, "I have started preparing this boy for therapy, but when he begins taking this medicine you have to follow the instructions as the doctors tell you." But as she was talking...you know, the director is a nurse; I think she read my mind. I was not concerned. She was talking to a log. She was talking to a stone. I looked at her. Then she told me, "But Vicky, do you know that you have a value? Do you know that the value you have is greater than the value of that circumstance around you? You have a value, Vicky. The value you have is greater than the value of the virus you carry in your body. Vicky, take it from me, you can live! Even Brian, Brian is going to live. I'm going to give him medicine. He will live. But your value is greater than the value of that disease. When God was creating man, He put His own breath in man, and that is the purpose and reason you are living and that virus is not killing you, though you are not on treatment, because God values His value in you."

I looked at her like she has always talked, and there was a moment of silence for about five minutes. And I was looking at her. She was looking at somebody who was not responding, and I think she now lacked words to tell me, but that was my turning point because when she gave me that gaze when we were in silence, the eyes were fixed right in my eyes and she was not talking. After that time she told me, "You can go home." In fact, she had wasted a lot of my time. I wanted to go home and rest. So I got up and went home. I hurriedly went home.

But when I reached home, of course to my bed, as I lay on my bed I started remembering the words of this woman. I remembered moments when my relatives, my friends would come and they would say, "How are these children going to live? Maybe they will go and stay with her sister." They were planning for my children. Why? Because they were planning for my burial. And none of them was planning for my sick child. I think they knew automatically that that one would die like an animal, and they just wrote him off. But then nobody had talked to me the way this lady had talked. And for sure she has followed me all this time. I started asking myself, but why is this lady following me? Why is this lady following me so much? Then I started picturing the eyes of Rose. When I closed my eyes it was moving in my eyes like a film, as if I was seeing her on the screen with very sharp, radiating eyes upon me. I cried more. I felt something come upon me. I felt some love embracing me, just like that. I just felt love at that point. I felt somebody embracing me.

That was the time, I now remembered, so I have been praying, all this time I have been praying, but I was not expectant. I was praying to God to bring me salvation, but I think I was not expectant. Now that God was bringing salvation again, I think I *did* want it. But until God surely revealed His face through Rose... I saw the face of God; I started imagining. Imagine, could this be God who is answering my prayers? And when I started imagining the prayers I had been praying, "God, show me Your mercy," then I started looking at God looking at me in that woman. The moment of silence spoke words in my heart at that time. I did not realize it when it appeared, but at the time when I started meditating upon it I saw an appealing eye, as if the eyes were saying, "I wish you know, I wish you know I sent My Son for you. I wish you know I died for you. I wish you know I have answered your prayers. I wish you know I have come now." I cried. I broke down the whole day.

But from that moment onwards, after I had wept myself off the whole day... it's amazing; it's something which is mysterious; I gained some strength. I got up and I felt some joy on the inside of me because I felt I was not alone then. I felt there was something, something I cannot explain, but I felt I was secure; I felt something had surrounded me; I felt somebody was always near me. I felt some joy around me. And from that time onwards I even gained the interest of going to Meeting Point without anybody following me. I started moving to Meeting Point and they continued with the preparation of Brian for medicine until they put him on medicine.

Let me tell you, from the time Rose started following me up to the time I started going to Meeting Point was almost a full year. They put Brian on medicine. When they put Brian on medicine she told me, "Why don't you come and try to help me do some counseling in the office?" I said, Rose is not serious. I need counseling and she wants me to counsel. She said, "I know you are getting bored at home." Then I said, But why me? She sees that I cannot do anything. I cannot walk, and she wants me to go and do some work in the office? Oh, that made me cry.

But what am I trying to say? Many times God has answered our prayers and we have rejected the answer of God. God answered a million times when Rose came to me and I said, No, I'm waiting for God still, and yet he had come.

In 2003, she started buying medicine for me also. She picked up the other two children and put them back in school. As I speak now, my firstborn is finishing higher university this year, in June. My second-born is finishing high school this year, in December. And my baby, Brian, is in his high school in senior three. All that just by the Grace of God.

But the time I cried to God to help me and God answered me, I closed my heart. Now I started asking myself, but why does Rose behave this way? Because if she behaved in an unusual way, not only to me but to others, but I don't know what the others saw, but for me I saw something beyond Rose. I started following, and it was difficult for me to find out. I was new and nobody could tell me who is Rose? I knew her as the director, fine, but it seems there is something beyond this being a director. I came to discover that Rose is living a certain type of life which is connected to a certain character of people, and that is the Movement. So then I encountered the

Movement through Rose. But let me tell you, even after encountering the Movement through Rose, that was another journey.

Coming to the School of Community was a problem because I did not understand. I understood Christ; I did not understand the School of Community. Those were two different things. It was not until last year when I came for that meeting in Rimini that I came to understand that this School of Community is real and it's not a club as I used to think. I thought it was some gathering, some group of people who do things in a certain way, but then I came to understand that they embrace this Mystery that goes beyond. It's just beyond being a School of Community. It just goes beyond.

You see we have situations in our lives sometimes that spit us out like rubbish. I was poured out like rubbish—my friends, my relatives, those who knew me. My husband knew I was a finished case. I was rubbish, but even in your houses as you sweep out rubbish and you put outside in the garbage pit, there's somebody who comes and picks out of the rubbish, there are things they recycle. I think God was excited for having received a piece of rubbish like me for recycling. I am a recycled product, a miracle of God.

Now when you go through a recycling system, there are challenges you meet, of course. And those challenges are the ones that take you to your greatness. I am not saying I am so great, but I have not been to the point of greatness without the presence of Christ around me. I embraced Christ as a personality. If I had the encounter through Rose and I lived the experience of Rose, I would have lost it all. But I went down to dig out what is this that makes Rose behave that way? I also want to have it for myself. And with all my heart I embrace Christ as my personal savior and He has become my friend. In any circumstance I know I'm not alone because if He was able to pull me from my dying bed, and my child, to put me where I am, I may not have reached where I want to go, but I am also not where I was. I am somewhere and I am on a journey. And this journey, the remaining part of the journey of my life I have dedicated to Christ.

I stand to repeat, what this man did, my husband did to me, I vowed and I still vow, I will not do it to any man because he did it to me willingly. We got married when we were okay and then on the way he decided to cheat on me, and brought me the infection, infected my child, and he abandoned us, but that I will not do to my husband. I decided to forgive him. I have decided to forgive him because he's blind. He needs a helper.

All the tests I have gone through I give glory to God because they have given me a testimony. There is no testimony you can get without a test, even in the classroom. You cannot testify to having been the first in the class when you have not taken a test in the class. So challenges in our lives take us to a certain point, but the hope I have now, the hope that keeps me moving is that I am sure, I am confident that the Lord God reigns. Even if I died here now, I would die with great joy because I have got the confidence that surely God lives and surely God saves. I have seen the saving power of God. I've seen the resurrection power of God. God raised my hope and he resurrected my body, and this is the body which is a total reality, which nobody can deny now. We always look at the works of God when we read the stories in the Bible, and we say, "Jesus did this and that," but Jesus is still doing it today. He has done it for me. Somebody will say, "You are still sick." If I were sick, I would have been in the hospital. I am not sick; I am only carrying a condition. I celebrate this because I am not in the hospital.

I want to speak about forgiveness as a power for the restoration of life. When you forgive, God also forgives you. Now God is only looking for somebody who has a willing heart. My heart was willing. My heart was willing and that is why when He came through Rose He found my heart was willing. And my heart is still willing, but God is not only looking for somebody who is able. If he were looking for somebody who is able...me I was not able. Even now I am not able. I am only willing and ready to follow.

When I met Carron last year, I met another experience and I said for that experience I had with Carron I will follow his footsteps. I am indebted to know the depths and the root of the power that makes whoever is in the Movement behave the way they behave. I may not know it fully yet, but I'm on the way to know. With Christ with me, I know that I will be able to know. He will always hold my hands and write my destiny. I surrender to Him.

Thank you for listening. May God bless you.

Albacete: Well, just one point, Vicky. We will digest all of this. Certainly we face, we have touched the same Mystery you have. We will look into this encounter with you and even penetrate deeper into what we have found.

I just want to let you know that I in particular have felt since I met you, and today, that there is a bond that unites us. It is one thing to hear things, to realize, to listen to a message, but when she is present like this I recognize that something that comes first, that bond that unites us as the Body of Christ.

Thank you very much. We are where you are, and you are where we are.