CELEBRATING LOVE

REJECTED BY THE SEMINARY, CHOSEN BY LOVE

BY JULIET ANNA LUKWAGO

PHOTO BY JULIET ANNA LUKWAGO



Garuhanga and Macrina with Bishop of Hoima Diocese, Vincent Kirabo after their thanksgiving Mass

After leaving the seminary, Joseph Garuhanga Amooti Katongole, 54, began searching for a life partner, trusting that companionship would come with time. It didn't — at least not immediately. He tried, quietly and sincerely, but doors closed without explanation. The rejections stung and for a while, love felt distant.

That uncertainty was not new to him. Growing up, Garuhanga had always dreamed of becoming a Catholic priest. Brilliant and disciplined, he excelled academically, scoring 23 points at A'level and ranking third nationally. After Senior Six, he was admitted to join either Alokolum National Major Seminary or St Thomas Aquinas National Major Seminary, Katigondo. But there was an obstacle he could not ignore — in the Catholic Church, a man cannot be ordained if his parents are not married in church — and Garuhanga's parents were not.

Unwilling to gamble with his vocation, he wrote to the Hoima Diocese Vocation director at the time, Fr Pascal Kihika, who advised him to first pursue university education.

"There was hope that if my parents wed in church, I could later return to the seminary. With that promise, I enrolled at Makerere University to study commerce and accounting."

Still, the calling lingered. He spoke to the university chaplain, Fr Dr Lawrence Kanyike (now Monsignor), asking him to intervene with his parents. The priest advised him to follow what his heart told him. Yet nothing changed.

"There were moments at Makerere when I wanted to cry, knowing that my dream vocation was slowly slipping away through no fault of my own," Garuhanga says.

He graduated in 1996 with a Second Upper degree. By then, his parents' marital status remained unchanged and he accepted that the seminary door had closed. It was time to let go and to begin again.

As Garuhanga rebuilt his sense of purpose, his thoughts kept circling back to someone familiar, Macrina Mary Gwezire Abwooli.

I PRAYED FOR HOLY MATRIMONY, SAYS MACRINA

Macrina, a graduate, sacrificed her career to raise their family. For nearly 13 years, she worked without a househelp. They share household responsibilities – he cooks when she is tired, often returning to find him already preparing food. When his job took him to Tororo for eight years, he left her at home with complete trust.

"I gave him peace," Macrina says simply.

Her own journey was anchored in prayer. After school, she asked God for a holy marriage, determined never to have children outside wedlock. After three years of prayer, she received an unexpected phone call one morning at Kolping Hotel in Hoima.

"I am Garuhanga Katongole," the voice said. "I want to marry you."

She did not take it seriously at first. Around the same time, she had gained admission to Makerere University's evening bachelor of commerce programme. But persistence, sincerity and faith carried them forward.

"Before marriage, we undertook medical tests together. Garuhanga paid my tuition fees and I studied while raising our children."

After graduation, Macrina focused on family life, later running a transport business for 10 years. Together, they supported extended family, including helping build her parents' home in Kigaya, Kiryandongo district.

Now married for 27 years, the couple's journey reflects resilience, faith and intentional love. In 2024, they marked their silver jubilee with a thanksgiving Mass led by the Bishop of Hoima Diocese, Vincent Kirabo Amooti, at Makerere sub-parish church. Family and friends gathered as they renewed their vows.

"We made our marriage a priority, kept God at the centre and raised amazing children who make me proud every day," Macrina says.

For Garuhanga, the dream of priesthood may have ended, but another equally sacred calling began.

"I had first met her years earlier during her visits to her brother Joseph (my close friend) at the seminary and later at university. She had always stood out — kind, composed and attentive," he says.

Before 1994, their paths crossed more closely when he was invited to her parents' silver jubilee celebrations.

"Among the many guests, she took particular care of me. At the time, I was a Makerere student. I appreciated her care."

After university, Garuhanga rented a house with Macrina's brother, Joseph.

"Macrina, then working as a receptionist at Kolping Hotel in Hoima, often visited. Those visits allowed our friendship to grow naturally through long conversations and shared laughter," he says.

Later, Macrina resigned from her job to pursue a diploma in marketing at Makerere University and moved in with her brother. Living under the same roof for some years deepened the bond between Garuhanga and Macrina.

When her brother eventually married and moved out with Macrina, Garuhanga remained closely connected to the siblings.

"By then, I was working at Shell Uganda. I eventually relocated to Busega — just a few metres from Joseph and Macrina," he says.

Then came the visit that changed everything.

One Sunday afternoon in 1997, Garuhanga saw Macrina approaching his new house with a shopkeeper, asking for directions. He welcomed her warmly, knowing she planned to see him before continuing to her brother's home. That visit became a turning point. They spoke openly about the future and agreed it was time to build a life together.

Soon after, Garuhanga helped her find a place in Kikoni near Makerere. Though they lived separately, they visited often, steadily weaving their lives together.

"As someone who had been in the seminary, I believed that if I was to marry, it had to be official," Garuhanga says.

By then, he had moved from Shell's marketing department to finance.

In 1998, they formally began wedding arrangements, starting with the Kinyoro cultural introduction ceremony, *kibona buho.*

Their cultural wedding ceremony took place on August 29, 1998. On October 10, 1998, at Bujumbura Cathedral in Hoima district, they exchanged vows, wedded by her cousin, Fr John Bushobozi.

"My wife is one-and-a-half years older than me," Garuhanga says with a smile. "But one-and-a-half years does not make a big difference. Now she even feels younger than me."

After the wedding, the couple returned to Nakulabye in Kampala, where Garuhanga was renting two rooms at sh80,000 per month. In May 1999, they bought a plot in Kyebando, Kampala and began building their home, eventually leaving rented accommodation behind.

Looking back, Garuhanga admits that before marriage, despite earning a good salary, he had little to show for it.

"Macrina brought order, discipline and stability. We pray together as a family, do not drink alcohol and I ensure I am home by 9:00pm. We operate a joint account and Macrina keeps custody of family property. Even in scarcity, we share what we have," he says.