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ESCALATING SUICIDE RATES AND THE NEED TO REINFORCE CHRISTIAN FAITH FORMATION

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When my sister called me up the other day evening, I thought that it was a routine call; indeed, it was. However, during our conversation, she mentioned that a relative of her in-laws' family, a devout lady in her early seventies, had committed suicide by jumping into a well located just in front of the house. She was suffering from various ailments for some years; but she never exhibited any suicidal tendency or initiated any conversation that would have given an indication of this extreme step that she would take. In fact, my sister opines that she was a wonderful woman, both at home and in the larger family and society; she was well respected in the family as she was sensitive to the needs of others and had been a good mother as well. Apart from the terminal illness that she was suffering from, there was her own daughter-in-law who had undergone a surgery for cancer who was recuperating at home. However, the triggering factor seems to have come from a phone call on the previous evening from another relative, who mentioned that the youngest daughter of the deceased lady was also suffering from cancer and that she had to

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undergo a surgery immediately. Later in the evening, although there were other members of the family around, she did not discuss anything about the news of her own daughter's ailment and the needed surgical procedures. Probably, the stress had been building up, which was not vented out, and by the next day morning, in the broad daylight, this mother of six children jumped into their own well. As this tragic event was witnessed by the recuperating daughter-in-law from her own sickbed, she immediately alerted others; although two neighbours had promptly jumped into the well in the hope of saving the victim, it was too late. The suicide of a well acclaimed Catholic lady in the family and the society is considered to be all the more tragic as two of her own sons are ordained priests. It is not only the ignominy usually associated with suicide in a traditional society that makes it difficult to understand, but the fact that a mother who had groomed all her children in firm Catholic faith, particularly by preparing two of them to be at the Altar of the Lord, at the moment of disturbance seems to have lost her balance of judgment, which led her to the extreme step of taking her own life.

The above instance of a mother in her mature age committing suicide may not be very common in the traditional Indian society, although such instances also are on the increase. Statistics indicate that the number of suicides as a whole is on the increase. Whether they are young students at the failure in their examination, or a youth in an unexpected love failure, or a grown up person due to failure of agricultural crops or due to the inability to repay a loan, or at the loss of a job, in the wake of an adversity which does not have any immediate and easy solution, many, especially in the last two decades, seem to adopt the way out from the given problem by resorting to self-killing.

The alarming figures available with the WHO indicate that over a million people commit suicide worldwide (without bypassing the fact that another two million comes out of suicide attempts – mostly hurt, physically and psychologically!), and the tendency has escalated further in the wake of exploding industrial growth and transformation of traditional agrarian society to a fast-paced modern city-oriented life. The changed ambience in families, especially the emergence of nuclear families, also contributes to its escalation, as the bumper ground for emotional outburst offered by the joint family system is almost completely lost. Sociologists and psychologists offer

us a number of prominent reasons to explain the escalating number of suicides. There are experts who insist that the reasons that lead a person to commit suicide must be looked at from a larger frame or a holistic point of view, as in most of the cases there are more than one reason that leads a person to such a drastic and self-negating decision and the ensuing action.

Whatsoever be the sociological and psychological explanations offered by social scientists, suicide not only brings in dishonour to everyone associated with but it also raises a number of serious moral questions as self-killing in itself is a moral evil. Although some states have relaxed or removed the legal penalties associated with suicide (strangely claiming that it is the right of the individuals to decide about their lives, which is not a morally justifiable position at all, whereby the legal provisions would lose their moral foundation), a consistent moral position, as it is upheld by the Catholic Church, insists that all that a human being is entitled to do is only to enhance his or her life, and never ever to endanger or damage it, temporarily or permanently. As it is categorically expressed in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, "Suicide contradicts the natural inclination of the human being to preserve and perpetuate his life... [and] is contrary to love for the living God" (CCC §2281). For, I believe that it would be "a supreme dishonour to the Creator," as the *Gaudium et Spes* rightly asserts (§27).

A close observation of the tendencies of any living being, human beings in particular, would clearly establish the fact that they spontaneously strive their best to stay alive till the last breath. Moreover, human beings who are able to understand and reflect about their lives have a greater responsibility to tend to it the best way possible, so that the goal of life – both natural and supernatural – can be realized through their conscious decisions and deliberate involvement.

In a moment of despair, some may feel that life is no more worth living, and due to their feeling of dejection and helplessness, they probably opt for ending their life by suicide. However, I consider that the increasing number of suicides among the elderly seems to set a very bad example for the youngsters who are struggling hard to stay afloat in the modern complex life situations (CCC §2282). It becomes all the more tragic when we find that persons who have been exemplary all through their lives, especially living a life infused with

faith in Jesus Christ, succumb to the temptations and take their lives by suicide. It is unfortunate that such events happen; they are, however, in my judgment, morally unjustifiable.

A person who accepts that God is the creator of the world also accepts the fact that He is the source of human life. In fact, Christian worldview revolves around the position that life is a gratuitous gift from God (CCC §2280) and that the recipient has not only to respect but should also tend to it with utmost care. For, it is the lifespan of one that is the time given for leading a life worthy of a child of God. Indeed, the worth that a person attains in one's life would be determined by the way one would respond to various challenges and opportunities that would arise in each one's life's ambience.

Although most of the human beings would wish to lead a joyous life till the moment of death, the fact of life is such that joys and sorrows, happiness and sadness, pleasure and pain are inherently part of anyone's life. While an excess of happiness would be welcome by the most, pain and sadness are usually shrugged off. As the new generations pretend to live in the bubble of plenty and are provided with all that they wish for, especially during their formative years, they are not equipped to accept denials and failures. Life seems to be facing a pathetic and dismal end, as even a little pain – emotional or physical – becomes almost intolerable for most of these generations. The pain-threshold seems to be decreasing as the new generations are emerging in the fast-track life of 'expected' (but unrealistic) success and plenty; for, it is quite unrealistic to think that success and plenty are easy to come by always. The increasing number of suicides taking place all over the globe seems to be resulting from the unrealistic expectations and unpreparedness to face the eventualities of life with balance and composure.

Although we do not know exactly for what reason people take their lives and how they would be seen in the presence of God (CCC §2283), both the true moral standards and the provisions of the law of Christ – both being the same in their essence – do not approve of such actions. In fact, the mind of Jesus is very clear that all human beings are invited to live their lives as per the plan of God, and no negative intervention shall be made that would adversely affect the life of any person, one's own life included. Positively, Jesus assures everyone to have life in its abundance (John 10:10), and every human being shall initiate processes that would enhance and enrich not only the life of

oneself but also of everyone else, particularly the weak and downtrodden: this is the model that Jesus himself has bequeathed to the world in and through his Incarnation.

Call to human life is a call to sharing; it is at the same time a call to live for others. This could be seen as the unique Christian contribution that makes human life more meaningful. It is in sharing oneself with others that one's life becomes enhanced and made meaningful; indeed, the sharing of oneself with others, though it certainly involves sacrifice of one's own preferences and priorities, would enhance the lives of others as well (see John 12:24). As this is exemplified in the mystery of incarnation of Jesus, it shall be the vocation of each Christian to imbibe the same spirit of sharing one's own being and all that he or she has with others so as to make Christian life worthy of its name. This call to sharing, which is very much Christian in its essence, has to continue all through one's life, even if it would result in moments of anguish and despair, agony and pain, losses and failures.

In the wake of utter loss and unbearable pain, the Christian way does not endorse any self-negating action, including the act of suicide, as it would not only preclude one of innumerable future chances of self-giving to enhance the lives of others, but would be an action that would thwart the total dominion of God, our creator (CCC §2280). As the fact of God's creatorship and dominion over the creation is accepted and celebrated by Christianity and almost every theistic religion, any act of a human being that would challenge God's dominion, particularly in acts of suicide, euthanasia, and abortion, is forbidden. It is clearly stated in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* as follows:

Suicide contradicts the natural inclination of the human being to preserve and perpetuate his life. It is gravely contrary to the just love of self. It likewise offends love of neighbour because it unjustly breaks the ties of solidarity with family, nation, and other human societies to which we continue to have obligations. Suicide is contrary to love for the living God (CCC §2281).

While God's supremacy must remain unchallengeable, it becomes all the more a challenge to establish a motive for those who take the brunt of incurable pain and irreplaceable losses. Whether such pains and losses are apparent or real, for the individual who faces them, they are certainly 'real' and, as a result, the responses tend to result in

acts of self-abnegation and denial of life. Following the example of Jesus Christ, the crucified, and the noble Christian practice that spreads over a period of two thousand years, every Christian must be equipped to find meaning in suffering. Although suffering is certainly considered to be part of the mystery of human being (Pope John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, §31), moments of pain and despair in themselves are life-denying. However, when they are borne either for the sake of God or for the sake of others, they turn out to be the best opportunities for transforming those depressing and life-denying moments into moments of life and grace not only for others, but for oneself as well. This is exactly what many saintly Christians have affirmed in their lives. For example, the life of Mother Teresa of Calcutta attests to this fact as she has proclaimed through her life that “a life not lived for others is not a life” at all.

The above Christian perspective on life seems to be completely lost sight of in the instances of suicides that were referred to in the first part of this brief reflection on increasing number of suicides, especially among Christians. While there are a number of solutions that we must put in place (including psychological measures as well as legal provisions to contain this tragedy upon human life), containing the ever increasing tendency of suicides especially among the Christians – among the elderly and the youngsters as well – calls for specific Christian responses. One that I would specially insist upon is to revamp the programme of faith formation that is offered to every Christian within the ambience of Christian family and parish. It is true that Christian faith formation aims at initiating neophytes into basic doctrines and other aspects of Christian life, especially focusing on the Bible and liturgy. However, as initiation into the above mentioned is facilitated, the selfsame programme of faith formation must make room for addressing the existential problems faced by an ordinary Christian, not only in ideal situations, but also in the actual situations of life. This would necessitate a pooling of the problems faced both by different age groups and categories of people living around. If serious deliberations on problems such as suicides can be facilitated and solutions to them could be gathered from our strong Christian faith foundations and sources, then faith formation shall make room not only for a theoretical understanding of Christian doctrines, but for their meaningful application in existential situations of life. Moreover, formal faith formation in the form of catechism, in a traditional parish setting, extends to almost a period

of twelve years, and it must focus on bequeathing a Christian perspective of life among the youngsters who join the regular programme.

Fundamentally, the Christian worldview categorically affirms life, and calls for actions that would only enhance life – both of the self and of the others. The life of Jesus Christ is the *model par excellence* with regard to the positive involvement in the lives of others. Be it a prayerful reading or a deeper analytical study leading to erudite research and insightful meditation, the Gospels attest to the fact that Jesus' life was a perfect 'yes' to life; every word and action in his life was life-giving and life-enhancing. His preferential option was for the least and the lost in the society who were ostracized by the rest; his words and deeds inspired and infused them with life so much so that they could share the abundance of life with others, as it was infused with the hope that Christ had shared with them.

It is such a sense of respect for life, and the resulting readiness to share oneself for giving life to others that set the basic tone and texture of Christian life. In such a Christian vision of life, there is no scope for denial of life, whatever be the consequence. It is this Christian vision of life that must be handed down to the younger generations through the extended initiation facilitated through formal and informal faith formation, carried out both at home and in the parish.

In this context, it must also be said that there is an emergency to equip the instructors of faith formation programme in order to meet the challenges posed by the students and other faithful. The general approach in catechism continues to be dealing with biblical narratives and initiating them into the basic Christian doctrines. While this constitutes the foundation of the faith formation programme in the Catholic Church, the need of the hour is to prepare the same group of committed teachers to handle intricate existential problems such as the increasing number of suicides and other acts of life denial such as euthanasia, abortion, etc., which seem to be spreading like a wildfire even among Christians.

Indeed, this is the welcome model that the Catholic Church has given us in the form of a basic document, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which offers a basic but clear Christian perspective on various issues that we encounter in our modern life situations. In fact, as we have

already seen from the preceding reflection, the holistic approach enshrined in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* would make it a model for faith formation in Christian life vision carried out in any context. It is hoped that the faith formation programmes worldwide will be reformed by integrating the Catholic teachings and world vision offered in this compendium of all Roman Catholic doctrine regarding both faith and morals, but at the same time making room for various life situations and cultural diversities that the Christian faith has already encountered and transformed.

As people are becoming more and more reluctant to accept failures and despair, pain and suffering as existential realities of life, a culture of death seems to overshadow life in the contemporary society. In *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), Pope John Paul II succinctly captured the conflict between intrinsic sacredness of human life and preference for individual person and pleasure in the following statement: "When the prevailing tendency is to value life only to the extent that it brings pleasure and wellbeing, suffering seems like an unbearable setback, something from which one must be freed at all costs" (§64). Despite such a tendency becoming widely prevalent in our contemporary cultures, Christian witnesses offer us with valid alternatives to value life as un-negotiable absolute good. Yet, there are many who feel withdrawn from life as they are either forgotten or uncared for by their own kith and kin. In situations of the sort, they yearn for someone to be connected with in life, through various acts of love and sharing. As Mother Teresa has put it, "The greatest disease ... today is not TB or leprosy; it is being unwanted, unloved, and uncared for. We can cure physical diseases with medicine, but the only cure for loneliness, despair, and hopelessness is love. There are many in the world who are dying for a piece of bread but there are many more dying for a little love. The poverty ... is not only poverty of loneliness but also of spirituality. There's a hunger for love, as there is a hunger for God."

A careless attitude towards issues of life and death, however, opens up a slippery slope that would completely thwart human life from its sacred domains. In such situations, the example set forth by Jesus calls for an existential involvement in the lives of those unfortunate ones by every Christian. That is, every Christian must have a readiness to share in the sufferings of others; as the popular saying goes, while shared joy doubles, shared sorrows become halved.

Whether the ideal of halving the pain and agony is actually realized or not, the attitude of Jesus calls for a considerate and compassionate approach towards all those who are stressed and strained by various events in their lives that would take them to brink of defeat and despair.

The right Christian perspectives, especially on controversial issues of life and death, must become the conviction of each Christian through the process of faith formation that will take place at home, in the parish setting, and specifically in and through the catechism programme. If the basic Christian positions expressed in the Bible and the doctrinal positions enshrined in the teachings of the Church, especially in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, could be made into convictions of each member of the Church, we would succeed in building up a Christian community that would not only value but also defend human life as the fundamental gift from God, which is a challenge as well as a task to live the life to its fullness. Such a Christian community would be the best answer that the world is in need of in order to face and weed out the challenges to life that our contemporary society faces.