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INCESSANT KILLINGS IN NIGERIA: NEED FOR RE-EMPHASIS ON RESPECT FOR HUMAN LIFE FROM CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Experiencing incessant killings in Nigeria in recent times as a result of bandits, unknown gunmen, herders/farmers clash, and other terrorist attacks, including politically motivated killings, it appears that the value of life is seriously depreciating among Nigerians. This trend has left some villages deserted; children made orphans, parents made childless, houses burnt and generally, degrading human life. Bearing in mind the place of life in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) of 1948, with the ever-important teachings of the Catholic Church on human life, this work discusses life as a value from a Catholic perspective. Using functionalist theory, which positions the Church as a part of society that should contribute to the well-being of the entire society, the position of the Church is presented as fundamental to all in respecting human life. Data were gathered from both primary and secondary sources of information. This work concludes in line with the teachings of the Catholic Church that life is of prime value, which nobody has the right to unlawfully take away, starting from the embryonic state until the author of life takes it. It recommends a concerted effort of the government and the people to protect life as sacred, and the Church should make an effort to teach this truth to all.

Keywords: incessant killings, life, respect, Catholic Church

Introduction

Life remains a value which every human being goes to any level to protect. No one wants his life to be taken away. No wonder an Igbo man would say, “swallow your life if an enemy wants to take it”. In another way, the Igbo would say *mpe mpe ndu ka onwu mma* which means no matter what, life remains better than death. In fact, it is likely that every human being desires to live and so tries to resist any attempt to terminate his life. This would be the main reason for which Igboman says “it is only a tree that hears that it would be killed and still stood”. This means that man does anything possible to defend and protect his life. Informed by this value of life, the United Nations General Assembly, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 explicitly states, “Everyone has the right to life” (Article 3).

In recent times in Nigeria, it has become everyday news how people are killed in various parts of the country. It is on record that killings were mainly experienced in the northern part of the country owing to various religious upheavals there. Umeanolue (2020), Izuegbu (2021) among other scholars made mentions of various killings in the area. However, the killings between 2021 and 2022 have spread to every geopolitical zone of the country. This goes by different names of the perpetrators. Sometimes, the killers are identified as bandits, herdsman, unknown gunmen, Boko Haram, ritualists, and so on. In most of these killings, scores are recorded as dead. Both civilians and security agents are victims of the killings. This has become a weekly occurrence, and it seems life is fast becoming meaningless in recent times. This has become so worrisome and requires ethical



questions and reorientation about human life. Human life is continually becoming abused as there is very little regard for what should be sacred. It is clear that the traditional African society values life and that no one is expected to take another's life. Now that society is in a civilized state, it is pertinent to re-emphasise the value of life.

Life (human life) is believed to be sacred, and so must be respected. No man can achieve anything without life. In fact, in all the articles of UDHR, the right to life remains the foundation, for without it, no other right is to be enjoyed. Having witnessed how life is bastardized in Nigeria, using the southeast of Nigeria as a case study, this work emphasises why life should be respected. Using the Catholic Teachings about life as a reference point, which is mostly in conformity with the Igbo of Nigeria's understanding of life, this work exposes life as sacred, which no one is unlawfully permitted to take. In a bid to do this, one may like to know why life is to be respected to this level. What makes life what it is? Should there be justification for whatsoever for termination of Human life? Is there any life that is worthless and so on? These are to be discussed in the course of this work.

A cursory on Killings in Nigeria between 2021 and 2022: Emphasis on South East

Using South-eastern Nigeria as a case study, which is made up of five states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo, it has become clear that the region has been witnessing incessant killings, especially between 2021 and 2022. This has become so worrisome in recent times as the region which had been adjudged the safest region has become a region where men fear in broad daylight. This gives credence to the belief that the value of life is fast diminishing among the people, especially the Igbo, who believe in the sanctity of life. Adebajo (2022) reports that nearly 10,400 people were killed in Nigeria in 2021. This figure shows to be the worst rate since 2015. Oluwafemi (2022) states how many persons that were killed in each state of Nigeria. Among the Southeastern states, Abia recorded 20 deaths, Anambra 148 deaths, Ebonyi 248 deaths, Enugu 53 deaths and Imo 98 deaths.

According to Premium Times of January 6, 2023 in what it titled "Year in Review: Some victims of senseless killings in Nigeria's South-east in 2022", some persons were mentioned killed. Among them were Kelvin Ezeoha who was killed along one other person in Enugu South Local Government on 19th January, 2022; Anthony Nwokorie killed in Ihitte Uboma Local Government on 14th April, 2022; Okechukwu Okoye and Cyril Chiegboka (Cyril Chiegboka was an aide to Okoye who was a serving lawmaker in Anambra State Assembly), Okoye was beheaded while Chiegboka was killed on 21st May, 2022; Nelson Achukwu a former lawmaker in Anambra state was on 22nd June, 2022 beheaded which happened after 15million naira ransom was reportedly paid by the family; seven youths were killed in Awomamma of Imo State on 17th July, 2022; Henry Chukwu was on 24th August killed in Ebonyi State; Lucky Idoko was killed on 8th October, 2022 in Enugu State; on 11th September, 2022, Senator Ifeanyi Ubah's convoy was attacked in Anambra State leaving five persons killed among others. The killings have continued almost unabated. The shock about death is fast diminished among the people as it seems normal news to hear of such death in the country. This is worrisome as it shows that human life is no longer valued especially by the perpetrators of the heinous crimes.

Respect for Life Explained

To respect implies to have a sense of the other's worth. In this regard, respect for human life means to have a sense of the worth or value of human life. Nzomiwu (1995) states what it

means to show honour and esteem for human life. Our Sunday Visitor (2013) explains that respecting life helps to appreciate other human beings as children of God. One begins to see that he has the responsibility for the well-being of one another. One recognises the need to protect the weakest and the most vulnerable. One discovers a responsibility to make this world a better place for everyone. It then follows that in the light of respect for life, no life is worthless, so every life is to be respected. Nzomiwu (1995) stresses that respect for life includes respect based on a person's position in the community, based on a person's individual qualities, respect based on love and respect accorded individuals for what they are. No matter the aspect this comes from, life is to be revered for what it is. In his encyclical, the *Gospel of Life*, Pope John Paul II states that the deepest element of God's commandment to protect human life is the requirement to show reverence and love for every person and the life of every person.

The dignity of human person cannot be separated from the respect for human life. Discussing human dignity outside the respect for human life is not accepted. Benedict XVI (2009) made this clear in his encyclical, made it clear. In his assertion:

The Church forcefully maintains this link between life ethics and social ethics, fully aware that a society lacks solid foundations when, on the one hand, it asserts value such as the dignity of the person, justice and peace, but then, on the other hand, radically acts to the contrary by allowing or tolerating a variety of ways in which human life is devalued and violated, especially where it is weak or marginalised (n.15).

It then means that any form of violation of the life of a human person, whether as a fetus or aged, is a devaluation of human life. If there should be respect for human dignity, that implies there should be respect for the life of a human person. Respect for human life encourages every pro-life activity and remains against any anti-life activity. In a world that is currently besieged by various anti-life programmes following the advances in science and technology, respect for life means that life must be valued from the very moment of conception. Any intention to terminate life as soon as conception takes place is a devaluation of life. It then follows that respect for life is not only for the strong and powerful but the recognition of the worth, dignity and potential of every human person by upholding the most fundamental human right to life. Therefore, life belongs to every human being regardless of age, dependency, or ability and that should be valued.

Basis of Respect for Human Life

God is the author of life. Human Beings were created by God and so, God alone has the right to take life. Life therefore is sacred. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (2011) states in line with the above that:

Human life is sacred because from its beginning it involves the creative action of God and it remains forever in a special relationship with the Creator, who is its sole end. God alone is the Lord of life from its beginning until its end: no one can under any circumstance claim for himself the right directly to destroy an innocent human being (n.2285).

The basis of respect for life remains on who created life. Man has no control over life and so should respect life as a gift from God. In all the creatures, man remains the only one created in God's image. Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith (1987) writing on this emphasises why life has to be respected from the moment of conception. According to it:

From the moment of conception, the life of every human being is to be respected in an absolute way because man is the only creature on earth that God has “wished for himself” and the spiritual soul of each man is “immediately created” by God, his whole being bears the image of the creator (p. 11).

This shows that life is not authored by the spouses. The spouses remain the medium through which God’s will for life takes place. Man is created with a soul, and the soul starts at the point of conception. Any attempt to harm the human being from the moment of conception is a devaluation of life. This authorship of the life of man makes him superior to other beings. Such superiority calls for respect for his life. Nzomiwu (1995), aware of this aspect of man, upholds that:

Man’s superiority over and transcendence of other beings in this world is a truth no philosophical system would care to deny even those rooted in materialism and empiricism. The superiority and transcendence is the singular dignity of man whether in the concentration camp or in the various other modalities of dehumanisation that threatens man in ideologies on the planet. It is on this that the dignity and respect for human life depend. Man’s consciousness spontaneously uncovers him to himself as a being surpassing all other beings in the visible universe not only in degree but also in kind. It is obvious that other beings cannot respond to the call of values as such and that they do not construct a culture which reflects an understanding of the nature of things. Man is different from brute animals because he has in himself a self-directing principle. He has intellect and will, he is a human person. Philosophically, it is on this that his dignity and fundamental right to life rest (p.3).

By the above indented paragraph, human life remains sacred because God the author of life makes man to be above other beings. Man is with intellect and will, and so his life must be respected. No one authors life and so no one can take it especially from an innocent individual except the one who authored it-God.

God, the author of life proclaimed in the Decalogue “You shall not kill” (Ex. 20. 13). This later commandment of God could be traced to the first murder in the scripture when Cain killed Abel. God immediately condemned the fratricide when He declares “What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground. And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand” (Gen. 4. 10-11). In the same Genesis, God warned that “whoever sheds the blood of a man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in his own image” (Gen. 9.5-6). The Catechism of the Catholic Church (2011) maintains that

The deliberate murder of an innocent person is gravely contrary to the dignity of the human being, to the golden rule and to the holiness of the creator. The law forbidding it is universally valid: it obliges each and everyone, always and everywhere (n.2261).

The prohibition on the killing of innocent persons remains absolute and not relative. A human being must not be killed, but his life, as long as he is innocent, must be respected. Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, stressed this and even gave an addendum of not harbouring anger against a human person. Be that as it may, the basis for respect for life is the authorship of life by God Himself. Life, by its very existence, is sacred, and no man can claim ownership of even his life, not to talk of others. With the prominent position of man among other beings as the only being God willed for himself, no man can intentionally

terminate another's life, which spans from the moment of conception. A human person has respect and dignity, which must be observed for its intrinsic worth.

Some Issues around Respect for Human Life

Respect for life is likely to raise certain questions as it affects the life to be respected. For instance, where is the value of life in an embryo or an individual who, it is known, has nothing to offer again in life? In view of this, it is important to discuss the issue.

Respect for Human Embryos: Many have argued that the human embryo is not a fully human person, and, so, may not be accorded the value of life. Many who are pro-abortion have used this as an argument. This is not true. Scientifically, after the fertilization of an ovum of a female by a male gamete, there is the formation of a zygote. This zygote is the first stage of the human person. The zygote already has life for if it has no life it won't develop. From zygote, life starts to embryo. Scientifically, there is already existence of life and so, the life should not be tampered with, otherwise, life is devalued. May (2000) holds that the scientific position about the zygote "gives a valuable indication for discerning by the use of reason a person is present at the moment of first appearance of human life" (p.35).

Every full grown human being is a product of this process. Terminating or disrespecting any life at embryo is the same. Though the embryo is defenseless, it has to be defended by the parties, lest there is devaluation of life. No doubt, the issue of respect for life of the unborn has continued to generate controversy. Many people recently reacted against the Obamacare programme in the United States because the unborn were not protected by the programmes. Nzomiwu (1995) saw a lack of respect for the life of the unborn as a violation of that principle. This was because life is sacred and its sanctity has been acknowledged among tribes as well as religions. According to Nzomiwu:

The moral issue of violation of the respect due to life, especially, that due to unborn child has existed throughout history and among almost all peoples. However, public morality and opinion have strongly protected unborn life. Among the Igbo, it was a taboo and an abomination to deliberately terminate the life of an unborn child. In all Christian tradition, the prohibition of abortion was considered an essential part of the fifth commandment, "Thou shall not kill". The Quran clearly forbids the killing of unborn children and infants. And for Hindus and Buddhist every life is considered sacred, including that of the unborn baby (p.4).

Terminating the embryo (unborn) is the termination of life which God has given. This is obvious from God's assurance to Jeremiah; "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you" (Jer.1.5). This is clear evidence that shows the presence of the gift of God (life) at point of conception. The Catechism of the Catholic Faith (2011) further gives credence to this when it upholds that:

Human life must be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception. From the first moment of his existence, a human being must be recognised as having the rights of a person-among which is the inviolable right of every innocent being to life (n.2270).

The Church recognises both from the scripture and *Magisterium* that life starts from conception. The idea of respect for human life must recognise the life of the unborn, which cannot defend itself. May (2000) reaffirms that "Since the human embryo must be treated

as a person, it must also be defended in its integrity, tended and cared for, to the extent possible, in the same way any other human being” (p.35). The CDF (1987) holds:

The congregation is aware of the current debates concerning the beginning of human life, concerning the individuality of the human being and concerning the identity of the human person. The congregation recalls the teachings found in the Declaration on Procured Abortion: “from the time that the ovum is fertilised, a new life is begun which is neither that of the father nor of the mother; it is rather the life of a new human being with his own growth. It would never be made human if it were not human already. To this perpetual evidence... modern genetics science brings valuable confirmation. It has demonstrated that, from the first instant, the program is fixed as to what this living being will be: a man, this individual-man with his characteristic aspects already well determined. Right from fertilisation is begun, the adventure of a human life, and each of its great capacities requires time... to find its place and to be in a position to act”. This teaching remains valid and is further confirmed, if confirmation were needed, the recent findings of human biological science which recognises that in the zygote, resulting from fertilisation the biological identity of a new human individual is already constituted (p.13).

By the above excursion, it has been established that the unborn should be accorded respect as a human being. This then implies that whatever is to be done to improve the well-being of the life of the unborn is encouraged while anything to be done which could not be for the well-being of the unborn should be discouraged. These include prenatal diagnosis, therapeutic procedures on human embryos, and research and experimentation on human embryos.

Prenatal diagnosis on the embryos is licit for the well-being of the life of the unborn. This is done with the permission of the parents, who have the utmost view of respecting the life and integrity of the embryo when it is obvious that the embryo will not be exposed to risk. If, for any reason, the diagnosis moves towards intentional harming of the embryo, it is total disrespect for the life of the embryo. The CDF (1987) concludes that:

Any directive or program of the civil and health authorities or of scientific organisations which in any way were to favour a link between prenatal diagnosis and abortion, or which were to go as far as directly to induce expectant mothers to submit to prenatal diagnosis planned for the purpose of eliminating foetuses which are affected by malformations or which are carriers of hereditary illness, is to be condemned as a violation of the unborn child’s right to life and as an abuse of the prior rights and duties of the spouses (p. 15).

Once the prenatal diagnosis is for the good of the mother and of the unborn, it should be carried out. Outside that, any intention to harm the unborn baby is devaluing the life of the new life.

Again, therapeutic procedures carried out on the human embryo remain licit as the foetus is protected. As long as the respect for life and integrity of the embryo are observed, it is acceptable to carry out therapeutic procedures. May (2000) states that “they are licit if they respect the embryo’s life and integrity and do not involve disproportionate risks” (p.35). It is also important to mention that whatever medical to be carried out on the embryo, the consent of the parents must be sought. The CDF (1987) citing Pope John Paul II affirms that:

A strict therapeutic intervention whose explicit objective is the healing of various maladies such as those stemming from chromosomal defects will, in principle, be considered desirable, provided it is directed to the true promotion of the personal well-being of the individual without doing harm to his integrity or worsening his conditions of life. Such an intervention would indeed fall within the logic of the Christian moral tradition (p.16).

This presupposes that any therapeutic procedure that is geared towards harming the embryo must not be conducted.

On the idea of carrying out medical research or experimentation on human embryos, it is allowed only if it is intended to benefit the embryo. Any experimentation or research which is not in the interest of the unborn should not be carried out for such is against his right to life and dignity.

Procreation and Respect for Life: Life is generated as God has ordained through responsible procreation. Procreation is carried out by a man and a woman united by marriage. Chiegboka (2012) holds unto this fact in his explanation on the goods of marriage. Life is procreated and not produced. For according to May (2000):

Respect for a human person in his origin requires that he not to be treated as a product. When a child is begotten through the conjugal act, he comes to be as a gift from God, a gift crowning the spouses' mutual gift of themselves to each other. When a child is "produced" it comes to be, not as a gift from God... but as a product of human control (p.37).

From the understanding of the basis of respect for human life, one recalls that God is the author of life through the conjugal act of the spouses. This respect for life owing to the basis is relegated by "artificial procreation". Life by artificial procreation is produced and not procreated. Responsible procreation, which comes through the self-giving of the spouses to each other, remains the responsible way of generating life. Hence, respect for life starts as such. This renders artificial fertilisation invalid in view of respect for life. A child, the CDF (1987) holds, has the right to be conceived, carried in the womb and then brought into the world within marriage. The author of life willed it so. Life starts with the unitiveness of the spouses, and respect for life is accorded to them. Where life is generated from heterologous artificial fertilisation, this source of life has not been observed.

Respect for Life and Legitimate Defense

This becomes another question on respect for life. The Catechism of the Catholic Faith states clearly that "love towards oneself remains a fundamental principle of morality" (n.2264). It is legitimate for one to defend his right to life. Citing Thomas Aquinas, the Document maintains that in defense of one's life, he is not guilty of not respecting life even if he commits murder.

If a man in self-defense uses more than necessary violence, it will be unlawful: whereas if he repel force with moderation, his defense will be lawful.... Nor is it necessary for salvation that a man omit the act of moderate self-defense to avoid killing the other man, since one is bound to take more care of one's own life than of another (n.2264).

This is one of the bases for just war. The defense of the common good requires that an unjust aggressor be rendered unable to cause harm. Therefore, in trying to defend oneself from an aggressor, life may be terminated in that case one is not guilty of devaluation of life.

Capital Punishment

Life remains sacred but its sacredness cannot violate the lives of others. Life is respected as long as such life allows other lives to exist. Where this life becomes a threat to others and society in general, a legitimate authority can issue capital punishment. Such an individual or life is comparable to a cancerous part of the body, which, if allowed to continue, would affect other parts of the body; it is better to cut it off the body. So, a hardened, unrepentant and malicious criminal should serve the death penalty as a deterrent to others and to allow peace in the lives of others. Respect for life is not absolute, for no one takes another one's life and expects his to be protected. This is to say that one must, in trying to protect his life, be conscious of the lives of others. Capital punishment, therefore, does not violate respect for life.

Euthanasia and Respect for Life

As explained earlier, life is not to be based on utility or age. Respect for life calls for the protection of the weak, the sick and the handicapped. The Church condemns direct euthanasia of any individual. When God cursed Cain to remain a fugitive, he gave him a mark so that no one could kill him (Genesis 4). All medical procedures that are burdensome, dangerous, extraordinary or disproportionate to a legitimate outcome must be discontinued. So, no one has the right to take another's life because of ability or utility.

Suicide and Respect for Life

Everyone is responsible for his life to God, the author of life. It is a grave scandal to life for one to take his life. God is the Master of life, so no one has the right to take his own life as an individual.

Civil Societies and Respect for Life

The issue of respect for life is serious and so, civil societies have a stake in this issue of utmost importance. The right to life is an inalienable right of citizens which has to be protected by civil societies. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) (2013), in viewing the situation in Nigeria, recognises that:

The right to life is the first of all fundamental human rights. Every threat to life is a violation of human dignity. In this regard, we must not fail to emphasise that the primary responsibility of government is the protection of life and property. We denounce the fact that Nigeria remains a place where some people wantonly kill (n.13).

It is the duty of civil societies, therefore, to ensure that the gift of life continues. No wonder the CBCN (2013) commended the Nigerian Senate for not allowing what it described as culture of death (gay marriage) in Nigeria. It then implies that if life is to be respected and protected, civil societies has serious role to play. The CBCN (2012), still on the importance of life, called on the various tiers of government in Nigeria to "wake up to their duty in this country" (n.4). Citing the CDF, the CCC (2011) clearly explains that:

The inalienable rights of the person must be recognised and respected by civil society and the political authority. These human rights depend neither on single individuals nor on parents: nor do they represent a concession made by society and the state; they belong to human nature and are inherent in the person by virtue of the creative act from which the person took his origin. Among such fundamental rights one should mention in this regard every human being's right to life and physical integrity from the moment of conception until death. The moment a positive law deprives a category of human beings of the protection which civil legislation ought to accord them, the state is denying the equality of all before the law (n.2273).

The point here is that civil authorities must make sure that life of everybody is protected and respected. In that case, the unborn, the weak, the sick, the aged and all the vulnerable individuals must be protected by positive legislations. The full realisation of rights of man is in society. Therefore, civil societies have to work to see that life is respected by all.

Conclusion

The incessant killings going on in Nigeria have become a thing of worry as they affect human life. Life is fast becoming meaningless among the people who always witness barbaric killings or hear the news. No matter the guise of the killings, be it by herdsmen, unknown gunmen, and the like, the result is that life which is precious is jeopardised. The value of life cannot be underestimated if an individual is to enjoy other rights. The right to life is a direct gift from God, and so it remains inalienable. Life must be respected based on its authorship -God. No one is the author of life, which starts from conception, and so, no one should intentionally terminate life, which he did not give. Any attempt to destroy or harm, whether the unborn or aged, is the devaluation of life. Life is procreated and not produced. However, by self-defence, life may be lost, but that has not shown any devaluation of life, just as every individual has his life to be protected.

In the case of a criminal offence, a person may be sentenced to capital punishment. Civil societies have this right when it is geared towards the good of all persons in society. Suicide, intentional homicide, genocide, euthanasia, as well as abortion are all against the respect for life. Civil societies, as a matter of utmost importance, should put machinery in motion through positive legislation to protect and promote human life. In so doing, they are to be guided by the rationalism and principles of life from its origin - God. These are the teachings of the Catholic Church about human life.

This work recommends, therefore, that the Church, schools and society at large should, as a matter of importance, revisit the teachings of the Church on respect for human life. The value of life has been going down in recent times. It is believed that if the Church and society take it up to promote the teachings on the value of human life, one may witness reduction. Not emphasising on this may eventually further reduces the value of life.

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