

THE SACREDNESS OF HUMAN LIFE IN TODAY'S SOCIETY

By

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ABSTRACT

The paper is aimed at reinstating the sanctity of human life with the following objectives: to explore the notion of sacredness of human life, investigate the ugly reality facing human life today, find out the causes of contempt for human life, demonstrate the scriptural foundation of sacredness of human life, x-ray the spirituality of sacredness of human life, show the Church's teaching on human life, and outline means of restoration of sacredness of human life. Expository and analytic methods were employed. Human life is being devalued and there are great threats such that its sacredness appeared to be under trodden. The paper discovered also that both the scriptural, spiritual, and magisterial teachings upheld the sanctity of human life. Recommendations such as reorientation of human mind, inclusion of moral education in school curriculum, sanitizing the polity, and responsible parenthood were proffered.

Introduction

The rate of killings and wasting of human life today in the contemporary society is becoming outrageous. The daily news seem incomplete without containing incidents of kidnapping, assassination, discovery of butchered/mutilated bodies and other related stories. One begins to wonder where the society is heading to. Fear and insecurity hover over everyone both in the villages and in the cities. In the midst of such happenings generating collective distress and uncertainties, it is pertinent to address the issue of the sacredness of human life.

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What does it mean to say that human life is sacred? What value does human life have for the present generation? What are the causes of today's contempt for human life? What is the scriptural, spiritual, and magisterial foundation for the sacredness of human life? How can the sacredness of human life be restored? These are the issues this paper is set to tackle.

Notion of the Sacredness of Human Life

'Sacredness' is a derivative from the Latin *sacer* ('sacred') denoting what is 'consecrated' or 'dedicated.' *Oxford English Dictionary* describes 'sacred' as referring to something connected with God or god or something very important and deserves great respect, synonymous with 'sacrosanct.' From this, David P. Gushee understands the concept to evoke attitude of awe, veneration or reverence when he states: "Human life is sacred: this means that each and every human being has been set apart for designation as a being of elevated status and dignity. Each human being must therefore be viewed with reverence and treated with due respect and care, with special attention to preventing any desecration or violation of a human being."²

The notion of sacredness of human life connotes the idea of inviolability, reverence, and immunity from violence. In other words, human life has the basic, intrinsic goodness in itself. This means it possesses inherent, inalienable, and ineliminable dignity arising from "the radical capacities, such as for understanding, rational choice, and free will, inherent in human nature."³ Implication of this is that life should be preserved and not intentionally taken away. With this understanding the present paper uses the term "sacred."

² David P. Gushee. *The Sacredness of Human Life: Why an Ancient Biblical Vision is Key to the World's Future* (Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2013) 24

³ John Keown. *The Law and Ethics of Medicine: Essays on the Inviolability of Human Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) 5.

Life is sacred. Its origin is from the supreme and uncreated Being, God who is holy. Human life has the imprint or image of this transcendental God; image which is not accidental or superficial but substantial. The divine breath from which human life springs up shares the same spiritual nature with God himself. Consequently, this imprint of divinity in man, the life arising from this divine action needs to be accorded proper respect and honour. To tamper with human life then is to meddle with what belongs to the all-powerful God. It is an assault on the power of the creator who by virtue of creation has this uncompromising authority over human life. God's will is that "life must be preserved, not only human life but also the life of other creatures in their respective species."⁴ This preservation entails non-elimination and sustenance of life.

Next, human life is irreplaceable. Inability of humans to replicate life fortifies its sacredness. Though science could clone human life and engage in artificial insemination and the likes, the original 'raw material' was created by God. Despite advances in bio-tech and computer science, with production of sophisticated robots, the incapability of science to create human life authenticates not only the existence of omnipotent and omniscient being, God who has the prerogative to make life exist, but also underlines the finitude of human mind and power. All these point to the high regard which ought to be accorded to human life since once taken away, no human power can restore it. This makes murder "an intrinsically evil act. It is a violation of the most important natural right of a man. By murder, one does a great injury to him nay, he takes away even the very foundation of every right of his."⁵

⁴ Emmanuel Nworu, "Preservation of Life: Perspective from Old Testament and Other Ancient Cultures," in *Journal of Inculturation Theology*, 14.2 (2013): 214

⁵Thomas Pazhayampallil. *Pastoral Guide* vol. 1 (Bangalore: Kristu Jyotu, 1995) 358

In addition, human life has meaning which tends towards fulfilling the divine purpose entrusted to it in creation. God has a plan for all his creation, especially for mankind made in his own image. This works out accordingly so long as the human creature cooperates. No one has right to thwart this divine plan whether by tampering with one's own life or that of others. This connotes respect for the real nature and purpose of human life and saving human life from damage and degradation. It means not seeing human person as an irrelevant, disposable or obsolete object meant for "commodification, exploitation ... abandonment and toxic death"⁶ or brutality.

Furthermore, any attack on human life by implication affects the entire creation because mankind has a divine mandate to enhance and ennoble creation. Human beings have been endowed with the ability to expand the work of creation, cooperating with the creator himself. Therefore, to exterminate human life is to obstruct the development of divine creative act. Besides, life is an inalienable right of every human being. The right to self-preservation is indelible in everyone. It is a natural right. Every individual wants to protect and develop his life. By virtue of this no one has the right to cause harm either to his life or that of others. No one possesses absolute right over one's life or that of others because life is a gift from God. Thus, it is an aberration and infringement on others' basic right to life to meddle with their life.

Besides, the sacredness of human life arises from the singular honour granted to human beings through the endowment of reason. No other creature has this gift in the same level with humans. It is a dignity reserved only to this creature with some aspect of divinity bestowed on his soul. With their intelligence human beings can control and coordinate other creatures that are stronger and bigger than them. This singular dignity carries with it a natural glory which evokes deep regard for the life that embodies this intelligence.

⁶ Norman Wirzba. *This Sacred Life* (Cambridge: University Printing House, 2021)

The Ugly Reality Facing Human Life Today

The sacred value of human life undergoes great threat today. The honour, respect, and reverence accorded to life tend greatly towards total disappearance. Regard for human life has been undermined so much so that unfortunately life has been reduced to a commodity, something to be bargained for and meddled with. Cases of ritual killing, kidnapping, organ-harvesting, and human trafficking abound. People get missing and when later discovered in some occasions, they are in their dismembered form. Life has been snuffed out of individuals in broad daylight. People have no second thought in setting a fellow human being ablaze. Such has become the bane of our present society, a scene for spectacle. No sympathy for life again. Some take money to assassinate others. Communities have been attacked and wiped out through brutal murder, while other victims, whether young or old, who are not hacked to death are maimed for life, with their houses burnt down. It is no longer considered a sorry sight to behold human body being roasted intentionally like a common animal or to see human head being played with like a football. So much barbarism exists today as human blood is spilled on regular basis. Fear and insecurity have engulfed everyone. The society is bleeding and the sacredness of human life appears to have vanished or grossly been trampled upon. Daily news regularly reports incidents of carnage, butchery, and other acts of inhumanity which shows that human life has been virtually reduced to the level of senseless beasts. In the midst of these disheartening incidents, the issue of sacredness of human life calls for collective reassessment, especially as it concerns the future of the society.

Causes of Contempt for Human Life

One central cause of desecration of human life today is Godlessness, which in itself is an offshoot of secular or atheistic humanism. This humanism “insists that there is no transcendent realm of values, and that within the secular world the human species is the supreme

instance of value.”⁷ It entails the loss of regard for God and sense of the sacred. Unfortunately, many of today’s youth are caught up in this web. They have lost interest in anything divine as they engulf themselves more in mundane things. As a result, the basic value of respect for life is also lost. Many have hardened their conscience such that spilling others’ blood for any reason does not perturb them. Hardly do they think of divine repercussion or the consequences of their action. Money, wealth, and power/influence have been prioritized over life. Some make themselves agents to scout for unsuspecting individuals or children to manoeuvre and sell out to ritual murderers. Others think it as bravery to track down anyone slated for them to assassinate for money or who poses an obstacle to their ambition. Most youth are engrossed in the desire to become rich overnight by any means possible. They are deprived of basic home training on reverence for human life since most of the parents today behave as if they have no time for inculcating such values in their children. Many youth thus grow up with no sense of divinity or fear of God in them. This results to their disregard for human life since they attach no value to God.

Another reason for the present carnage and contempt for human life is frustration. Many of the youth are frustrated with the status quo. Some see their lives as unfulfilled and hopeless in the face of poverty and unemployment while many of the rich flaunt their wealth. This frustration exposes to them either the option to make wealth quick like the barons around by any means at all even if it entails trading on human parts/organs, engaging in kidnapping or ritual murder or to revolt by venting their anger and frustration through indiscriminate killing or maiming of others at any least provocation. The frustration worsens by the present politics or governance that appears insensitive to the plight of the populace and favours only few elites and those in the seat of power. Many are disgusted with the polity that siphons the public fund and leaves the economy worse to the detriment of the common good. One effect of this frustration is the carnage the society is witnessing today.

⁷ John Haught. “Humanism” in *The Modern Catholic Encyclopedia*. Eds. Michael Glazier and Monika K. Hellwig (Bangalore: Claretian, 1997) 409.

In addition, the collapse of law and order brings about threat against human life. Little or nothing is done in the area of ensuring the security of life and control of ammunition. Those who ought to protect life are sometimes guilty of indiscriminate killings. The cases of “*Endsars*” saga with Lekki Toll Gate massacre buttress this point. What can be said of herders welding sophisticated weapons and the source from which they get their supply? What about the rise of different insurgent groups both with religious and political undertones as the common people appear helpless before them? All these threaten greatly the security of the general public and endanger the life of innocent citizens.

Also, contempt for human life arises from substance abuse. Drug abuse, especially among the youth, causes mental imbalance, conduct problems, personality disorders, suicidal thoughts, and gangsterism, among other things. Whether these hard drugs are sedatives (example, benzodiazepines), stimulants (example, cocaine or methamphetamine – *mkpuru mmiri*), opiates (example, heroin, oxycodone or tramadol) or other similar drugs, their abuse brings about disastrous consequences for their users and the society at large. Study has shown that “even in small dosage, sedatives, hypnotics, and opiates have subtle effects on cognition and motor skills that may increase risk of injury....”⁸ Hence, drug abuse by some youths today has led to assault on human life, especially when their users become addicts and are no longer in touch with reality. In such a situation, the drug addicts fail to recognise the value of human life and the need to preserve it. How then can respect for life be restored in the face of all these? This calls for scriptural foundation on the sacredness of human life.

⁸*The New England Journal of Medicine*, nejm 354.14 (April 6, 2006)
www.NEJM.ORG

Scriptural Foundation of Sacredness of Human Life

The need to preserve life is rooted in the Scripture which maintains that life comes from God. Genesis 2:7 states that God breathed into human being the breath of life. This life is sacred to God, hence humankind is commanded not to murder (Exodus 20:13). Among the Israelites, even in the case of manslaughter, the guilty individual is expected to exile oneself into one of the cities of refuge (Numbers 35:6).

Scripture notes that it displeases God when murder is committed. Thus, in the case of Cain who killed his brother, Abel, Genesis 4:11 notes that he was cursed from the ground that received his brother's blood. Reflecting on Genesis 9:6 that forbids the shedding of human blood, it has been asserted "that biblical faith has drawn an uncompromising line against taking of another life, period. Human life is intrinsically of value and may not be ultimately violated."⁹

The blood of innocent persons appears to be depicted in the scripture as something very precious and efficacious. In 2 Samuel 21:1 the famine suffered by Israelites during the reign of David was attributed to the bloodguilt on Saul and his household because of the Gibeonites whom Saul put to death despite their covenant with the Israelites. 2 Kings 3:27 reports that the blood of the Moabite's Crown Prince offered as a burnt offering during attack on Moab caused great wrath upon the Israelites such that they withdrew from complete destruction of the Moabites in a war.

Generally, blood (even animal's blood) is revered in the scripture such that Israelites were commanded not to eat blood because, according to Leviticus 17:10-11, life of the flesh is in the blood. Also, in view of preserving and not destroying life, the Israelites in Leviticus 19:17-18 were enjoined not to hate their neighbour nor take vengeance. Rather, they should love their neighbour as themselves. Jesus Christ elevated this love of neighbour by

⁹ Walter Brueggemann. "The Book of Exodus: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections" in *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, Volume 1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2015) 413.

extending it to one's enemy (Matthew 5:43) and made the yardstick no longer the self but he himself: "... that you love one another, even as I have loved you" (John 13:34). Where genuine love exists, no one wishes harm or injury on others, not to think of taking their life.

Spirituality of Sacredness of Human Life

God intends that human life should achieve its purpose. One needs life to realise God's destiny for him in this life. Jesus asserts that he came that human beings may have life to the full (John 10:10). Man's duty is to cooperate with God to actualise God's plan not only for oneself but also for others. Hence, life should be enhanced and not destroyed. This is in line with the intention of the creator.

Despite the fact that it is the spirit that gives life (see John 6:63), a human person is a composite of body and soul. The whole person – body, soul, and spirit – needs therefore to be taken care of. This means in a nutshell to preserve human life and not to destroy it. Bodily life should not be pitted against the spiritual life nor the earthly against the heavenly. Human life as a whole ought to be thoroughly looked after. This is holistic spirituality which Wilkie describes as embracing the totality of a person's existence. Thus, no dichotomy should exist between the human and the holy, the secular and the sacred.¹⁰ Life of the body and soul must be developed not exclusively but together. This life should be preserved and catered for as one entity. Ways of doing this in the context of the present discussion include: promotion of peace and love as against threat to human life from disunity and hatred; respect for the divine commandment of not to kill; cultivation of forgiveness and mercy instead of vengeance; perception of divine image in fellow human beings; and deep regard and care for human person as a being with body and soul.

The spirituality of sacredness of human life enjoins a Christian to cultivate the spirit and example of Jesus who defended and promoted life than allowing it to be snuffed out of a person. He saved the woman caught in adultery from being stoned to death (John 8:4ff), healed the sicknesses of many from what threatened

¹⁰ Au Wilkie. "Holistic Spirituality" in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*. Ed. Michael Downey (Bangalore: Theological Publication, 2003) 488-491

their lives, delivered the demoniac whose life had been messed up by evil spirits, and raised some dead persons, out of compassion for human beings. For example Lazarus (John 11:43-44), the daughter of Jairus (Mark 5:41-42), and the son of the widow of Nain (Luke 7:12-15). He enhanced human life by caring for both the body and the soul of the multitude following him. He fed the hungry with bread (Matthew 14:19-21) and nourished their spirit with the consoling and enlivening word of God through his preaching and teaching. He comforted the sorrowful and felt with the afflicted. This shows that it is a Christian duty to forgive injury, to protect the defenceless, to pray for healing of sicknesses and deliverance from demonic manipulations, and to promote the cause of health services in the society.

Church's Teaching on Human Life

Church's teaching on human life and its sacredness is rooted on the natural law, the written word of God, and the Tradition. In *Gaudium et Spes* of the Second Vatican Council, responsible parenthood is upheld when the Church considers as terrible certain practices like abortion and infanticide. The document states that "God, the Lord of life, has entrusted to men the noble mission of safeguarding life, and men must carry it out in a manner worthy of themselves. Life must be protected with the utmost care from the moment of conception: abortion and infanticide are abominable crimes."¹¹ Nothing should be placed in the way of development of human life. *Humanae Vitae* of Paul VI advocates that transmission of life according to divine plan should be upheld; contraception is seen as an intrinsic disorder.¹²

¹¹*Gaudium et Spes* 51

¹² Paul VI. *Humanae Vitae* 14

In the Declaration *De Abortu Procurato* of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, it is stated that life is the most basic value, therefore one cannot justify procured abortion in view of protecting any other value:

The right to life remains complete in an old person, even one greatly weakened; it is not lost by one who is incurably sick. The right to life is no less to be respected in the small infant just born than in the mature person. In reality, respect for human life is called for from the time that the process of generation begins.¹³

In their Declaration on Euthanasia the Sacred Congregation emphasises that direct killing of an innocent person is never permissible:

It is necessary to state firmly once more that nothing and no one can in any way permit the killing of an innocent human being, whether a foetus or an embryo, an infant or an adult, an old person or one suffering from an incurable disease, or a person who is dying. Furthermore, no one is permitted to ask for this act of killing, either for oneself or for another person entrusted to his or her care, nor can he or she consent to it, either explicitly or implicitly; nor can any authority legitimately recommend or permit such an action. For it is a question of the violation of the divine law, an offence against the dignity of

¹³ Declaration *De Abortu Procurato* of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (28 June 1974) no.12

the human person, a crime against life and an attack on humanity.¹⁴

John Paul II in *Evangelium Vitae* 56 sees death penalty as an extreme case which may not be necessary today. Similarly, he notes that direct abortion always constitutes a grave moral disorder because it is a deliberate killing of an innocent human being.¹⁵

In line with the above, Pope Francis bemoans turning the family that ought to protect life into sanctuary of death when he asserts that:

... if the family is the sanctuary of life, the place where life is conceived and cared for, it is horrendous contradiction when it becomes a place where life is rejected and destroyed. So great is the value of a human life, and so inalienable the right to life of an innocent child growing in the mother's womb, that no alleged right to one's own body can justify a decision to terminate that life, which is an end in itself and which can never be considered the 'property' of another human being Similarly, the Church not only feels the urgency to assert the right to a natural death, without aggressive treatment and euthanasia, but likewise firmly rejects the death penalty.¹⁶

Restoration of Sacredness of Human Life

How can the sacredness of human life be restored? To realise this, effective reorientation of the human mind through proper education

¹⁴ Declaration on Euthanasia of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (5 May 1980) AAS 72, 542-552

¹⁵ John Paul II. *Evangelium Vitae* 62.

¹⁶ Pope Francis. *Amoris Laetitia* 83

is a necessity. “Education is very important to getting at the root of the problem. Education is training the mind and body of the human person. When this is done he would appreciate the goodness in creation,”¹⁷ especially the value for human life. The young minds today need to be taught the dignity and reverence proper and basic to human life. Education should not centre only on intellectual development of the person but also on character or moral formation. Human values necessary for integral development should also be imparted in schools. Okere rightly pointed out that “the moral dimension which religion adds to our education is also a necessary complement to our mere bookish knowledge.”¹⁸ Absence of thorough moral education in most schools is presently breeding a generation of young people lacking in basic human formation. To forestall the contempt for life arising partly from this calls for an overhauling of school curriculum at all levels. The minds of pupils and students need constant enlightenment concerning the sacredness and inviolability of human life which should be respected and protected from any form of destruction.

Another remedy is to address the societal ills, especially as regards flamboyant lifestyle. The trend of extravagance and flaunting of wealth is impacting negatively on the youth of today. It creates in them excessive ambition to become rich quick, even though dubious and evil means. Some young people wrongly believe that the end justifies the means. Therefore, any way money is made, even if through kidnapping, human trafficking, or ritual murder, does not matter. Becoming rich and wealthy is seen as the only pathway to relevance and popularity in today’s society. Integrity and hard work have been thrown overboard because the present society appears not to recognise such. This mentality and practice call for urgent change in order that the sacredness of human life be restored.

¹⁷ Godwin Okeke. “Human Ecology in Nigeria: A Moral Evaluation” in *Theology for Sustainable Ecology in Africa*. Ed. Ferdinand Nwaigbo et al. (Port Harcourt: CIWA, 2011) 180

¹⁸ Theophilus Okere. “The Mission of Christian Education” in *Okere in his Own Words: The Hermeneutics of Culture, Religion and Society*, Volume II. Ed. J Obi Oguejiofor (Owerri: Whelan Research Academy, 2015) 155

Consequently, sanitizing the political system of today is very essential. The situation where money determines who occupies a political post calls for a change. Competence and integrity should be top priority over and above other criteria. To be in a high political position places one in a limelight for emulation, especially by the youth. When people of dubious character are entrusted with such high position of governance, the system continues to decay. Instead of healing the societal ills, the lifestyle of such individuals will militate against any effort towards any remedy because “when the leadership becomes so corrupt, the lines between right and wrong become completely blurred.”¹⁹ On the contrary, entrusting important political offices to people of integrity constitutes a serious step towards rectifying the malady afflicting the society; this will help to reinstate respect for human life and not bastardize it.

Further step towards re-establishing the sacredness of human life is promotion of true religion. Unfortunately, in the present era many religious sects appear to concentrate in enriching their founders and promoters. The central message of preaching in many religious gatherings is neither directed towards the salvation of souls nor condemning the societal ills but on prosperity and mundane issues. Religion that ought to be the conscience of the society is in some occasions used in fostering certain abhorrent crimes. People today are duped in the name of God. Certain religious leaders identify themselves more with the rich than the poor and the lifestyle of some others has become scandalous due to the flamboyant and double-standard life that they live. However, if religious leaders should be committed whole-heartedly to propagating the message of salvation, religion will then become a dependable channel in promoting the proper dignity and reverence for human life.

In addition, to check the contempt for human life today demands putting to an end the spread of cultism both in schools and the society at large. Violent juvenile crime, corruption and cultism are among the evidence of moral decadence plaguing the society today.²⁰ Awareness should be created on the danger of cultism

¹⁹*ibid.* 156

²⁰ Jacob Anioke. “Moral Education and Character Development: An Appraisal off the Nigerian Society” in *Theology and Youth Empowerment for Integral*

towards self-actualisation and orderliness in society. Those at the helm of authority ought to make concerted effort to disband cultic groups whose operation include terror, carnage and various forms of destruction.

However, government should endeavour to provide the teeming population of youth opportunities for self-employment through setting up of skill-acquisition centres since an idle mind is the devil's workshop. "The youths are Nigeria's greatest hope for the future and it is important that they have real job opportunities as well as empowerment through vocational training and job creation programmes."²¹

In addition, parents should revisit their discharge of the God-given duty of rearing their children in the fear of God. It is from home that a child begins to cultivate regard for the sanctity of human life. "Every child grows within a family, and the family life where the child grows up wields large influence on the development of that child."²² Unfortunately, many parents today have no time for their children's home-training. Children are either entrusted to the care of a nanny or to a day-care centre. Such attitude is creating a great lacuna in the life of most children. What such children watch on television or internet are not censured. For this reason, some children grow up without realising the fundamental value of human life. These children take brutality as a normal way of life, and may turn out to be insensitive to the feelings of other human beings.

Development of Africa. Ed. Ferdinand Nwaigbo et al. (Port Harcourt: CIWA, 2014) 536-553

²¹ Innocent A. Eje. "Youth Empowerment and Job Creation: A Lasting Solution to Poverty and Youth Revolution in Nigeria" in *Theology and Youth Empowerment for Integral Development of Africa*. Ed. Ferdinand Nwaigbo et al. (Port Harcourt: CIWA, 2014) 442

²² Cajetan Okechukwu Ani. "Christian Family Spirituality as a Means for the Formation of Children: Implications for the Church in Africa" in *Journal of Inculturation Theology* 17:1 (2020) 48

Conclusion

Human life is sacred and should be treated as such. Life is a gift from God who alone has absolute authority over every life. The brutality against human life and reckless killings of today are alarming and call for a collective rethink on the sanctity of life. Contempt for human life is not only an attack on the individual but also an assault on collective human existence because human beings are social in nature. They have inter-connected existence. Restoring the sacredness of human life demands deep reorientation of human mind at all aspects such as education, politics, religion, and in social relationship.