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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 the recent times as a result of bandits, unknown gunmen, herders/farmers clash, and other terrorist attacks ongoing 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 of 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 Catholic perspective. Using functionalist theory which positions the Church as a part of the society that should contribute in 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 embryonic state until the author of life takes it. It recommends concerted effort of the government and the people in protection of life as sacred and the Church should make effort in teaching this truth to all.

Keywords: *Incessant killings, Life, Respect, Catholic church*

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1. 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

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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 the 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 in the part of the country. 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, herdsmen, unknown gun men, 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 the recent time. This has become so worrisome and requires ethical questions and reorientation about human life. Human life is continually becoming much abused as there is a very less regard to what should be sacred. It is clear that the traditional African society values life that no one is expected to take another's life. Now that the society is in a civilized state, it is pertinent to re-emphasize 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, 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 south east of Nigeria as a case study, this work emphasizes on 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 understanding of life, this work exposes life as sacred which no one is unlawfully permitted to take. In a bid to doing 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.

2. A cursory on Killings in Nigeria between 2021 and 2022, Emphasis on South East

Using Southeastern Nigeria as a case study which is made up of five States of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo, it has become a clear happening that the region has been witnessing incessant killings especially between 2021 and 2022. This has become so worrisome in the recent time as the region which had been adjudged the safest region has become a region where men fear in a broad day light. 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.

Generally in Nigeria, Adebayo (2022) reports that nearly 10,400 persons 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 South-eastern 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 15 million 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 a 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.

3. 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 that it means to show honor 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 recognizes 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 and 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 accord individuals for what they are. No matter the aspect this comes, 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. It is not accepted to discuss human dignity outside the respect for human life. In his encyclical, Benedict XVI (2009) made this 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 marginalized (n. 15).

It then means that any form of violation of life of a human person whether as fetus or aged is devaluation of human life. If there should be respect for human dignity, that implies there should be respect for 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 advance 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 to the strong and powerful but the recognition of 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 to that should be valued.

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

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 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 life of man makes him superior over other beings. Such superiority calls for the 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 dehumanization 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 person remains absolute and not relative. 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 on this and even given an addendum of not harboring anger against a human person. Be that as it may, the basis for respect for life is on 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. Human person has respect and dignity which must be observed for its intrinsic worth.

5. 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 full 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 formation of zygote. This zygote is the first stage of 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 presence at the moment of the 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 but has to be defended by the parties otherwise, 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 lack of respect for the life of the unborn as 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 termination of life which has been given by God. 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 Church (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 recognized as having the rights of a person-among which is the inviolable right of every innocent being to life (n. 2270).

The Church recognizes both from the scripture and *Magisterium* that life starts from conception. The idea of respect for human life must recognize 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 Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith (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 fertilized, 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 fertilization 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 recognizes that in the zygote, resulting from fertilization the biological identity of a new human individual is already constituted (p. 13).

By the above excursion, it has established that the unborn should be accorded respect as human being. This then implies that whatever to be done to improve the well-being of 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, 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 with 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 life of the embryo. The Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith (1987) concludes that

Any directive or program of the civil and health authorities or of scientific organizations which in any way were to favor 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 fetuses 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 fetus 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 Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith (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 basic 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 self-giving of the spouses to each other remains the responsible way of generating life, hence, the respect for life starts as such. This renders artificial fertilization invalid in view of respect for life. A child The Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith (1987) holds has 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 unitive of the spouses and to that respect for life is accorded. Where life is generated from heterologous artificial fertilization has not observed this source of life.

6. 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 basis 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.

7. 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 individual or life is comparable to 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 death penalty as a deterrent to others and to allow peace for the lives of others. Respect for life is not absolute for no one takes other one's life and expects his to be protected.

This is to say that one must in trying to protect his life must be conscious of the lives of others. Capital punishment therefore does not violate respect for life.

8. Euthanasia and Respect for Life

As explained earlier, life is not to be based on utility or age. Respect for life calls for protection of the weak, the sick and the handicapped. The Church condemns direct euthanasia on 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 discontinue. So, no one has right to take another's life because of ability or utility.

9. 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 own life. God is the Master of life and so, no one has right to take his own life as an individual.

10. The Civil Society and Respect for Life

The issue of respect for life is serious and so, the civil society has a stake in this issue of utmost importance. The right to life is an inalienable right of citizens which has to be protected by the civil society. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) (2013) in viewing the situation in Nigeria recognizes 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 emphasize 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 the civil society therefore to make sure that the gift of life continues. No wonder the CBCN (2013) commended the 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, the civil society 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 Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, the Catechism of the Catholic Church (2011) clearly explains that

The inalienable rights of the person must be recognized 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 the civil authority must make sure that the 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 realization of rights of man is in the society. Therefore, the civil society has to work to see that life is respected by all.

11. Conclusion

The incessant killings going on in Nigeria has become a thing of worry as it affects human life. Life is fast becoming meaningless among the people who always witness the 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 jeopardized. 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 devaluation of life. Life is procreated and not produced. However, by self-defense, life may be lost but that has not shown any devaluation of life just as every individual has his life to be protected. In case of criminal offence, a person

may be sentenced to capital punishment. The civil authority has this right when it is geared towards the good of the entire persons in the society. Suicide, intentional homicide, genocide, euthanasia, as well as abortion are all against the respect for life. The civil society as a matter of utmost importance should put machinery in motion through positive legislations 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 the 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 emphasizing on this may eventually further reduce the value of life.

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