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The Church's role in the preservation of human life
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Introduction

The Catholic Church is no doubt the most organized institution in the world. The Church as an institution is not only concerned with the spiritual and pastoral needs of her faithful, she is interested also with their social, moral and physical well-being. Hence, the reasons for the various regulations to guide the different spheres of their lives ranging from the sacramental life to other aspects of the life of Christ's faithful particularly as it has to do with the dignity of the human life. Since the Church is pro-life, she promotes the preservation of the human life from conception to natural death. As such, she is against any technological advancement that poses threat to the inherent sanctity and dignity of the human life. Therefore, Abortion, Euthanasia (mercy death/ mercy killing), Suicide, In vitro fertilization (IVF), the use of contraception, using human foetus, homosexuality and lesbianism and so forth are considered as against the preservation of the sanctity and dignity of human life. So, we shall base our reflection on the Church's role in the preservation of human life.

The Sacredness of Human Life

Human life is sacred from creation because God made man a god by putting His Spirit in man. Sacred Scripture states: "God created man in the image of himself, in the image of God, he created him, male and female, he created them" (Gen. 1:27). Then the fall of man, made God pronounced death as a means by which life could be taken from man by Him. And one of the effects of the fall is the first murder case as recorded in the Bible, which was the killing of Abel by Cain the brother. That act of willful termination of life by Cain attracted on him an instant curse and punishment from God. "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground. Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand" (Gen. 4:10-11). This is a pointer to the fact that human life is sacred and that God was pro-life from origin. Also, in the Ten Commandments, He handed down to Moses, the fifth that declares: "Thou shall not kill."

However, as human society advanced, there evolved the need to create ground norms or constitution for the regulation of human behaviour and the protection of the sanctity of human life. There exist now in every modern nation, provisions for certain inalienable rights of persons living in such States. These rights are commonly referred to as *Fundamental human rights*. At the top of these rights is the right to life. This is because an individual has to be alive in order to enjoy other fundamental rights. In Nigeria, the right to life and other Fundamental Human Rights are entrenched in Chapter IV of the 1999 Constitution. By this provision, no individual is permitted to take life either as a result of suicide/euthanasia and/or murder/abortion.

Unfortunately, in recent times there have been calls from various secular Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's) and other foreign nations on the Nigerian government to legalize abortion, euthanasia, same sex union and other anti-life laws. Some foreign governments have now tied their aids and grants on the adoption of anti-life laws by Nigeria. Therefore, these push by foreign nations and other secular NGO's must be resisted and repelled by the Church in all ramifications since she is pro-life.

The Mission of Christ as Pro-Life

The mission of Christ on earth is primarily pro-life. He came to restore us back to life from the death we incurred from our first parent's fall (cf. Gen. 3:14-19). He made reference to this fact on different occasions in His public ministry. For instance, He asserts that: "I have come that they may have life and have it in abundance" (John 10:10). "I am the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6). "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35). Therefore, Jesus Christ has taught us that life must be protected at all times. This was the message He passed on during his interrogation with the Scribes and Pharisees: "Is it permitted on the Sabbath to do good, or to do evil; to save life or to destroy it? (cf. Lk 6:9; 14:3-6). In the same vein, He practically protected the woman caught in adultery from being stoned to death (Jn 8:1-11). Also, He rebuked James and John for nursing the idea of destroying life (Lk 9:51-56). He even restored some dead people to life (cf. Lk 7:11-17; Mk 5:35-43; Lk 8:49-56).

The Church's role in the preservation of human life

The Church being the body of Christ who is the head continues in the same mission of giving, preserving and saving life with her pro-life movements in the world. Indeed, the Church is at the fore-front of preserving human life. The Church carries out this role through the following mediums: her teaching office, her prophetic mission, pastoral care and her priestly functions.

The teaching role of the Church: The Church as a mother has a primary role of teaching and nurturing her Children, adhering to the command of Jesus Christ: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. And teach them to observe my commandments..." (Matt. 28:19-20). The Church through her teaching office (Magisterium), defines in clear terms, doctrines and formulates, moral and ethical principles that uphold the dignity of the human person; respect for and preservation of the sacredness of the human life. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: 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 right of a person among which is the inviolable right of every innocent being to life (cf. no. 2270). This resonates with the scripture: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you and before you were born I consecrated you" (Jer. 1:5). If God has formed and consecrated us from the womb, it is a clear indication that abortion and other related practices are evil. The Church continues her role of teaching through her

different Papal Encyclicals, Synodal exhortation and apostolic letters like *Humanae Vitae*, *Donum Vitae*, etc.

The Prophetic role of the Church: The Catholic Church continues to pursue its prophetic role with undivided attention. She does this by proclaiming the good news of salvation, by the witness of life of her members, and by actively contributing to the upliftment of the human person in the society. According to the *Code of Canon Law*, “the Church has the right always and everywhere to proclaim moral principles even in respect of the social order and to make judgments about any human matter in so far as this is required by fundamental human rights or the salvation of souls” (Canon 747). Therefore, the preservation of human life is the right and obligation of the Church which she exercises and fulfills through her rich social doctrine. The top most of the right is the right to life from conception to its natural end; presenting it as the condition for the exercise of all other rights and she condemns every form of abortion and ‘mercy-killing’ (*Compendium of the social doctrine of the Church*, no. 155). This is also in line with the fundamental human right of which the right to the life is its first.

Pastoral care for the less privilege: Talking about the pastoral care of the less privilege, Pope St. John Paul II states emphatically that: “As far as the Church is concerned, the social message of the Gospel must not be considered a theory, but above all else a basis and a motivation for action” (*Centesimus Annus*, no. 57). The action the Pope refers to here is the kind that the early Christian community practiced in the Acts of the Apostles: “There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet and it was distributed to each as any had need” (4:34-35). To this day, the Church still gives meaning to human life, through her pastoral activities. She inculcates in her children the culture of preserving the sacredness of life, upholding the dignity and decency of the human person, promoting justice and peace and the culture of respecting rights of the other. All these are achieved through her hospitals, schools, health centres, caritas organizations and welfare groups.

Exercise of Priestly role: The Church also helps in the preservation of human life by sanctifying and governing the Christian community through the celebration of the sacraments by priests. Sacraments like the Eucharist and Penance helps the faithful to live their social commitment as a fruit of the mystery of salvation. The priests through the ministry of the Word and Sacraments give Christ’s faithful the necessary psycho-spiritual support to enable them face the challenges and difficulties of life. This also helps to encourage pro-life groups and associations, thereby preserving human life.

Conclusion: The Church, time immemorial has continued to maintain the mission mandate of Jesus Christ by being pro-life. Pro-life is implied in statements like: “Go make disciples of all nations”, “heal the sick”, “cast out evil spirits” and “raise the dead”, “you received without charge give without charge.” We are saddled with this great task of the preservation of human life in a world that is greatly against life. Therefore, for the Church to remain faithful to being the

life of the nations and salt for the earth, she has to be committed to her roles of teaching, prophetic, priestly and pastoral care. These are the only ways she can influence the world theoretically and practically to be pro-life.

Recommendations

The Church in her role of preserving human life on earth through her pro-life mission has come out with the following recommendations:

1. All citizens (from the leaders to the ordinary) of Nigeria must accept that the protection of human life is a divine assignment and a moral choice that should not be treated with levity.
2. Parents should be the first to teach children the value of sanctity of life, the fear of God and the golden rule through family catechesis (Deut. 6:4; Matt. 7:12; Tobit 4:15).
3. Parents should also teach children the right African values of respect for life, respect for human person, love for God and neighbour.
4. Parents should censor the type of video their children view to avoid their children being carried away by negative effects of the social media.
5. School educators should promote mutual respect and love among staff and students.
6. Core values of human life should be reinforced and modeled by staff and students.
7. Government policies at all levels must protect life and property of the people.
8. Effective deterrence and pre-emptive measures must be put in place by relevant public institutions to curb avoidable loss of life in Nigeria.
9. There should be sincerity on the side of government in implementing national policies.
10. The Church's stand on the sanctity of human life remains. She still has zero tolerance to all practices that are against the promotion of the sanctity and dignity of human life like: willful murder, abortion, euthanasia, suicide, the use of contraceptives, herdsmen and Boko Haram killings, abduction and forceful religious conversion, cloning, stem cell and In vitro fertilization research, using human foetus, human trafficking, homosexuality and lesbianism and other sexual deviations etc.