

SUICIDE AND CHRISTIAN HOPE

Rachel Joyce Marie O. Sanchez

Abstrak

Kasus bunuh diri di antara kaum muda yang bertambah jumlahnya misalnya di Filipina, Korea, Jepang dan China merupakan masalah kemanusiaan yang sekaligus menantang kaum beriman. Apakah pengalaman keputusan itu nyata? Manakah pesan kristiani yang layak disampaikan kepada keluarga yang ditinggalkan dan kepada masyarakat yang dibayang-bayangi kasus bunuh diri? Bagaimanakah memahami danewartakan iman kristiani yang berdimensi pengharapan? Struktur pengharapan kristiani berdiri pada Yesus Kristus yang dibangkitkan Allah dengan jiwa dan raganya. Hal ini mendorong kita untuk meyakini kebaikan intrinsik dan integral dari setiap ciptaan, serta untuk tidak menutup mata terhadap kekuatan kejahatan yang dapat menggerogotinya.

Kata Kunci:

hope, youth, suicide, creation, eschatology

1. Introduction

Suicide has been an unresloved life and death issue that has been bothering me from the first few years of my graduate studies and teaching in Ateneo: suicide.¹ This issue has challenged my proclamation of Christian hope. How do I acknowledge people's real experience of despair and yet proclaim the reality of hope? At the face of grieving loved ones who know the pain of death that suicide brings, how can I say, "Death where is your sting?"²

1.1 Concern and Theological Question

The implications of using a language of faith when talking about suicide also need serious consideration. Where is God in this darkness? As Christians, we believe that the ultimate hope is not really separated from present hope, that Christ whom we will be with in the future is the Resurrected Christ who is already present today.

And if we do speak in the language of faith, what could be the consequences of this? Wouldn't this just be detrimental? Would a talk of an afterlife in heaven

motivate a suicidal person to cling on to this life? Or would it push the person into further finding a way to escape from the present life and move into the next? On the other hand, would hell scare someone who already experiences life as incessant hell? Or would it instead just give reason for other people to withhold compassion when it is direly needed?

As Goethe in *Werthe* on the topic of suicide says, "We can only discuss something honorably in so far as we sympathize with it,"³ hence the issue of suicide will be tackled in terms of the three pressing questions that immediately confront persons who face the reality of someone taking his or her life, mainly, "Who commits suicide," "Why commit suicide," and "What happens to those who commit suicide," relating these to the structures of hope identified by N.T. Wright: Creation, Evil and Redemption.⁴ While still different from but always dependent on its Creator, creation is good because it is God's act of love. Within creation, God created human beings to reflect God as stewards of God's creation.⁵ On the other hand, evil consists in the idolatry human beings commit when they worship something created other than God, and this increases and intensifies even beyond individual intentions.⁶ Finally, redemption consists in the restoration of goodness of all creation and of human beings through Christ, accomplished in God's loving act of self-giving. The three questions regarding suicide seem to bombard people almost simultaneously, so do the reality of creation-evil-redemption which penetrates our lives and our world, not simply one after the other, in a manner limited by certain periods in time and history. Creation is not restricted to the past, sin to the present, and redemption to the future.⁷ Thus, my discussion will be thematic and not chronological.

1.2 Experience

I first awoke to the reality of suicide when I was in high school. My friend's ex-boyfriend shot himself. He eventually fell into a coma and passed away a few days later. I remember the hospital guards complaining that that particular patient (whom they only knew as a room number) always had so many visitors who were rowdy and noisy. It turned out that he had many friends, most of whom were teenagers who didn't quite fit in the hospital setting. I was able to talk to his mother when I visited him. His mother recounted that he was still conscious when he was being brought to the hospital. He was just able to say a sentence before he collapsed, "Mama, ayoko na." (Mom, I don't want anymore.) He was just a high school boy but he took his own life.

My next experience of knowing someone who committed suicide was when I was already in my masters. A fellow graduate student and a former classmate, who was a teaching assistant to one of the Jesuit professors in the university, locked himself up in their department overnight. He was found dead the next

morning after suffocating himself. This young man was a very intelligent person. He had a whole academic career before him. As a teaching assistant, he had students under him. Yet, he took his own life.

In the same school year of the teaching assistant's suicide, my own student took his own life. He just didn't come to class one day and then we found out that he hanged himself after getting into a fight with a friend. This occurrence was particularly painful and disturbing for me because I was this person's theology teacher. Our lesson during those days was even about the goodness of creation. He even recited a couple of times. I saw value and potential in him. Why did he throw all that away? What was he thinking?

These three persons were all young people. All three had good qualities in them. All three had friends and relatives who valued and loved them. All three had so many years of life before them right before they all cut their lives short. What were they thinking?

I only began to understand what may be going on in the mind of someone who commits suicide when another friend attempted suicide but was forcibly restrained by people who saw him. I asked him what he was thinking of when he was about to kill himself. He said, "Nothing. There was nothing but darkness."

2. Analysis And Discussion

2.1 Sociological-Anthropological-Philosophical

A news article from *Inquirer* written in 2012 shows that the suicide rate in the Philippines has increased and that most of those who have committed it are around 24 years old and below.⁷ This problem, however, has become prevalent in many other parts of the world as well. Studies about attempted and completed suicides among women in China have brought forth the conclusion that factors behind suicide consist of both internal psychological problems, and external economic and physical health factors.⁸ Studies from South Korea reflect similar finding and conclude that efforts to prevent suicide must involve both social and cultural factors aside from addressing psychiatric disorders.⁹ A study from India likewise emphasizes the importance of a "sociocultural autopsy" in analyzing the local contexts and causes of suicide.¹⁰ In the United States, some psychologists have studied the correlation between tweets and suicide and have recommended that Twitter be considered as, "a potential platform for public health interventions to prevent suicide."¹¹ A study on suicide among children has shown that interpersonal conflicts within the family is not only a crucial risk factor for suicide but the social events such as an economic crisis can also affect the family and children's well-being; so, it concludes that, "social, cultural and environmental factors can exacerbate or mitigate existing personal suicide risk factors in children."¹² All these point out that there is a correlation between

incidences of suicide and psychological difficulties and depression. Moreover, aside from individual psychological issues, socio-cultural and environmental factors are also at work.

2.2 Spirituality-Theological

2.2.1 Creation

When my former classmate committed suicide, we reacted by talking about who he was. We talked about who he was as a son and brother. We talked about how he excelled as a student. We talked about his dreams and about how he touched lives. In other words, we found ourselves grappling with one of the most immediate questions people ask about a person who commits suicide: who that person is.

These questions about security, identity, purpose, meaning and destiny about each person's life is ultimately a question of "origins." To seek to understand who a human being is or was is ultimately to go back to why that person is, to how that person fits in the reality around him, and to ask where he or she came from.¹⁴

We Christians believe that God's creation is a meaningful act was done for God's purpose of communicating his goodness and love because "it was good" (Genesis 1:1-25).¹⁴ Creation is not just a universal truth but is also a personal truth for every individual person. My classmate's, my student's and my schoolmate's existence are willed by God. Their lives are a product of God's meaningful act. Their very being, they themselves, are God's creatures, God's communication of His goodness and love, and this is very well attested for by their families and friends.

Moreover, we human beings, hold a special place among God's creatures. Genesis 1:26 attests that we have been made in God's "image and likeness." We may be able to better appreciate this with Hughes' contemporary understanding of our human identity and dignity through his discussion of the dimensions of man's excellence. We human beings are characterized by relationality, rationality, spirituality, creativity, derivative authority and morality.¹⁵ My student's mother vividly recalls how loving her son was to her. He was very protective and caring towards her. He would eagerly drive for her as his loving service to her. Sometimes, it is easy for some people to make harsh judgments towards suicides, to immediately label them as sinners, but when we look closer and listen to actual stories of their lives we recognize the same dignity, the same image and likeness of God, we have in them.

And yet, God's creation is on-going. He put in our hearts a direction towards self-improvement, we realize our humanity daily.¹⁶ Our perfectibility is seen in terms of our freedom to decide. The influence of other people, our

own reason and experience as well as divine providence enable us to grow and develop. A good example of this is adolescence. A stage within our process of growth wherein we are given time to establish our own individual separate identity, our ability to become involved in healthy intimate love relationships, our ability to function independently, our capacity to trust and to think well of oneself and an enthusiasm for growth, new experiences and work that is both fulfilling and meaningful.¹⁷

The shock with which we react to suicide reflects the inconsistency of this reality to the goodness of creation. Dr. Giovacchini adds that it is only expected that sensitive and thoughtful adults will react with alarm to the apparently senseless and terrible waste of human life and potential that the increasing incidents of suicide represent.¹⁸ De quiros, apparently writing about my student, reacts with the same disbelief:

...You are hard pressed to understand how anyone, least of all someone who has the future spread out before him, would want to take his own life. Survival is the most elemental instinct of all. It staggers the mind to contemplate something that so resolutely goes against the grain of human nature, at least as we commonly understand it.¹⁹

We find it difficult to accept that someone so “wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14), gifted with so many great characteristics described above, has done something so evil and destructive to himself or herself. We react to suicide with such horror, shock, anger and disbelief because it contradicts our very humanity, the very intention our Creator has for us and harms the very image of Him in us:

Suicide contradicts the natural inclination of the human being to preserve and perpetuate his life. It is gravely contrary to the just love of self. It likewise offends love of neighbor because it unjustly breaks the ties of solidarity with family, nation and other human societies to which we continue to have obligations. Suicide is contrary to love for the living God.²⁰

2.2.2 Evil

Despite all the goodness that there is, why does a person still commit suicide? This is another question immediately asked by the bereaved. This questioning demands that we face the other side of our human reality: sin. Yes, we have been created good; we have been given excellence and perfection. But on the other hand, we experience sin, imperfection and destruction as real too. Yes, we human beings have been given life and it can be found within our nature to preserve and nurture this life, but death is also a fact for us, and part of seeing ourselves as we truly are is admitting that we are capable of turning against life and wanting death. This is what Louis-Lansberg explains:

But above all, we need to have lived and to have understood only a little of the human heart, to know that man can welcome the idea of death. It is not true that man always loves life unconditionally. Such is human suffering that psychic life that is at all developed will necessarily be subject to this temptation or at least know moments when man will wish death.²¹

Killing oneself is indeed a very evil and destructive thing. However, the Church teaches that psychological issues, fear and suffering may lessen the responsibility of the person who committed it.²² Many modern day psychological findings put to question the freedom and rationality of those who commit suicides.²³ We call them suicide victims.

But can we ultimately blame chemical imbalances? For human beings, pointing to universal physical or biological causes are hardly adequate explanations since we believe that free persons are not simply controlled by these. Chemical imbalances may be valid causes but they cannot be the ultimate cause. Something, rooted in human freedom or abuse of human freedom, must have in turn caused them.²⁴

Original Sin (including concupiscence and death), as Rahner puts it, is man's universal "situation." Original Sin is even present before our exercise of personal freedom. Although we believe that original sin is blotted out in baptism, it is, as a universal phenomenon, not blotted out.²⁵

Even psychology agrees that we do not enter the world at birth as a blank slate. Neither do we face adolescence with a blank start. Different unconscious impulses and varied conditions surrounding the person, the different conflicts and the abilities to cope with the challenges of the world are not formed independently at an instant. They exist in a wide network of human relationships that affect each other. We, including the adolescents who may be experiencing a more difficult time, because of the growth they must accomplish, find ourselves in a universal situation that can make it even more difficult for us to realize our perfection.²⁶

The universal situation of sin, imperfection and brokenness is manifested in the common situations that have been combined with weak personal resiliency cause the chemical imbalances (depression, mania, etc.) which lead to suicide. These include poverty, emotional, physical or sexual abuse, isolation, multiple loss or family-breakdown, faulty emotional attachment patterns, chronically-impaired self-esteem, marginalization, chronic unemployment, acute/chronic substance abuse, chronic life-threatening illness, alienation, lack of support system, being a victim of bullying, and painful psychiatric illness. As the studies cited from the earlier part of this paper has shown, there are indeed many socio-cultural and environmental factors at play in the issue of suicide.²⁷

Moreover, the human person is internally in tension. This tension is very clear in concupiscence.²⁸ Concupiscence in the narrowest sense is pre-moral and

non-free. It is a reality spontaneous within us that makes it more difficult for us to exercise our freedom. But because it does not involve our free decision, it cannot be morally judged.²⁹

It is possible that a psychologically unhealthy person is experiencing diminished freedom. For Landsberg, the human being who commits suicide has no intention of destroying his person, but rather of saving it.³⁰ The spontaneous urges and drives in the person become very strong and chaotic that it causes panic. Though the person has the intention of saving himself, the panic causes him or her to kill himself.³¹ Therese expresses this understanding from her own experience of suffering:

Watch carefully, Mother, when you will have persons a prey to violent pains; don't leave near them any medicines that are poisonous. I assure you, it needs only a second when one suffers intensely to lose one's reason. Then one could easily poison oneself. (August 30, Green Notebook)³²

Thus, despite the contradictoriness or unreasonableness of suicide with regard to our dignity, it still happens and even continues to happen, in the context of universal sinfulness and evil in the human being and in the world. This is undoubtedly a manifestation of shared human brokenness. De quiros expresses this well:

Naturally, they have been profoundly devastated by it, he being an only child. Your son or daughter dies from accident or disease, your grief will be incalculable. To lose a child this way, it boggles the mind. His friends are particularly unnerved, and cannot for the life of them understand why he did it. The usual recriminations are there: maybe they should have taken him more seriously, maybe they should have been more sympathetic, maybe they should have warned his parents.³³

2.2.3 Redemption

"Ma'am, what will happen to him?" This was the first question that welcomed me when I entered the classroom after the first of a series of suicides in the college. What happens to the person who commits suicide? This is another question that immediately bothers the bereaved. Somehow we know that the person has not exactly ceased to exist, which renders our question valid. We can still validly be concerned about his or her outcome in the afterlife. To ask this is to inquire along the lines of eschatology, our systematic reflection on the content of our Christian hope.

Implicit to the question of what happens to individuals who commit suicide is the question of where they go. This question can actually be misleading because human beings do not really go "anywhere". Eternity is not contained by our categories of space and time. Hell, Purgatory and Heaven, therefore are not

places. Neither are they processes or periods in time the way we usually imagine them. However, in order to talk about these, we must make the most of our finite human language and metaphors.

It would be more comfortable to say that no one goes to hell because God is gracious, as Origen posits. However, the all-powerful God, respects our human freedom. N.T. Wright proposes an understanding of hell as a dehumanizing, or shrinking of the image of God in us, which we choose. It is a consequence of idolatry and dehumanization. It is what happens when human beings, made in the image and likeness of God, make a deep down decision to reject the good Creator and say that we do not want to worship him nor be transformed by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This position acknowledges the goodness of God but also the power of our choices.³⁴

Freedom is necessary for a sin to be chosen and it is only through sinning that a person connives to his or her own dehumanization. Thus, those who say, "All those who commit suicide end up in hell," are badly mistaken. Not only is their statement uncharitable; it is also false.

More than an investigation of sin; however, what the situation calls for is a contemplation of God's mercy. The woman whose son passed away perceived this profound truth with a mother's heart, "I love my son. Can't I trust that God loves him even more than I do?" Here are some statements regarding suicides from the perspective of psychology:

In short, they did not want to die. Their attempt to end their lives was a call for relief or help.³⁵

In fact, the vast majority of those who kill themselves have no desire or intention of forfeiting their salvation.³⁶

The act of suicide does not, to me, express despair, but rather a wild misguided hope directed to the vast unknown kingdom on the other side of death.³⁷

We could only speculate and never do justice to what God will find in the suicide victim's heart, but as we Christians believe with certainty that Love is what can be found in God's heart. If compassionate psychologists and counselors could perceive the cry for hope, help and mercy in these people, what more our God? In God, we can validly hope.³⁸ Our Catechism teaches that, "We should not despair of the eternal salvation of person who have taken their own lives. By ways known to him alone, God can provide the opportunity for salutary repentance."³⁹

N.T. Wright, however, offers a further insight. For him, neither heaven nor hell is the ultimate goal. What we await is the renewal of all creation that will occur on earth as it meets with heaven. For N.T. Wright, "The question ought to be, How will God's new creation come? and then, How will we humans contribute to that renewal of creation and to the fresh projects that the creator God will launch in his new world?"⁴⁰

While, it is usually individual eschatology that comes to mind, theologians remind us that we Christians are invited to have a broader perspective and see eschatology also as collective and universal. Individual eschatology refers to the future of the specific and whole human being.⁴¹ Collective eschatology is the social dimension of eschatology that concerns the future of humanity and the world. It speaks of human beings as members of a whole society and participants of a common history. Universal eschatology pertains to the redemption of the whole human being, the environment and the whole cosmos.⁴²

While speculating where suicide victims go may be of great importance to loved ones, it is not enough. Because eschatology is also collective and universal, we still have to go back to our world and to the reality that we live in a situation where many have already lost hope and ask how we can participate in the recreation of a better world and a fulfilled Kingdom, where no one will feel alone, lost, desperate or despairing anymore. We must allow our future hope to penetrate the present.⁴³

3. Pastoral Suggestions

3.1 Vision

When I went to the wake of my student who committed suicide, I told his mother that her son was a good student. I told her, "He was one of my students who made sense."

She replied with the humor left in her, "Now, he makes no sense."

During that time, I really did not know how to reply. Indeed his death, seen from the context of all the meaningful experiences and relationships he had and the great future ahead of him, was indeed baffling. Eventually, I realized what answer I could have given: "God can make sense out of human nonsense." The final word is the victory of life over death already accomplished in Christ's Resurrection. But how can this response make sense to a grieving mother and to the rest of the world? The Church, we the community of believers in the resurrection, must engage the world, encounter the lost and the grieving to bear witness to hope through our concrete actions of compassion. To my answer, it must hastily added, "and God's Spirit empowers us towards building a more sensible and sensitive world."⁴⁴ Our faith precisely leads us to mission.⁴⁵

Action necessarily flows from believing in the resurrection. The praxis of hope is a moral imperative that springs for from hoping. God's promised future is already in-breaking in the present. As a Christian who believes in the resurrection, I cannot but participate in the work of witnessing to hope as we await God's Kingdom. As a community of Christians, we cannot but evangelize.

Indeed, God can make sense out of human nonsense but we have to let God do so through our participation in building for the Kingdom. To translate our reflections on our understanding of suicide and ourselves, in relation to our Faith, into action, both personal and social interventions are needed.⁴⁶

3.2 Theological Language

Let us not deprive loved ones of their right to hope. I once knew of a teacher who told her student whose father committed suicide, "Your father will go to hell." This statement not only hurts the child's ability to look towards the future with hope, it also damages the child's image of God and does injustice to the relationship among the communion of saints who hope in one another. Instead, let us empower people to pray for loved ones who passed away, not to barter with God, but to express trust and thanksgiving.

This is not to romanticize suicide but to view it as persons of hope. We must continue to hold that suicide is evil, harmful, destructive and scandalous. But our faith tells us that it is not necessarily a mortal sin and it does not necessarily lead persons to hell. Acknowledging the reality of chemical imbalances and socio-cultural factors should not serve as a reason to excuse those planning to commit suicide. Instead, these point to humanity's shared responsibility in the problems of our world. The human being who committed suicide may have had diminished responsibility or no responsibility over the suicide, but we, as one humanity, created by God, experiencing and causing our own brokenness, but invited to accept redemption and be made whole again, are all responsible.

More than asking where people who have committed suicide go or for caring about people's souls, we have to look at our world and the people around us. It is our mission as Church to go out into the world and build for the Kingdom by working in institutions, communities and society in order to live out and share eschatological hope. Pastorally speaking, this means establishing a culture where people can feel valued, accepted and affirmed; rather than being pressured to compete with one another. This means recognizing people for their goodness rather than immediately judging what needs to be changed. This means cooperating with one another to build a more just society; rather than thinking only of individual welfare.

3.3 Pastoral Accompaniment

We need to affirm the image and likeness of God in the youth. The young among us are truly having a most difficult time, dealing with who they are and what sort of relationships they can build, while facing the world's overwhelming demands and pressures. We see that those who commit suicide among adolescents and young adults are those who have already broken down. There is a very urgent need among us to show these dignified human beings that

they are unconditionally loved and accepted in our society regardless of what they can achieve or fail to achieve. Some just need to be listened to. We may have to pause from our own preoccupations and give them the importance and “special” treatment they deserve. It is not enough to catechize them that they are made in God’s image and likeness, we have to enable them to experience that reality indeed, through *cura personalis*.

For those who are experiencing overwhelming difficulties with themselves, counseling or psychiatric help may be needed. Let us not ignore people who talk about thinking of or planning to commit suicide, these may be indicators of wanting help. One of my friends who committed suicide took anti-depressants without prescription in order to deal with his concerns (but this made matters worse). Those about to commit suicide want to live and survive but they need help. Spontaneous urges can effectively be managed before they become destructive. Dr. Giovacchini explains how assistance can save:

The point is that many teenagers “driven” to suicide, driven to tragedy, can, with the appropriate intervention, be redirected to hope. A good percentage of those who are rescued go on to lead productive lives. In my view, and it by no means unique, the urge to die, especially in teenagers, is really in essence an urge to live that has somehow derailed. No one who has been involved with adolescents need to be convinced of the enormous fund of sheer energy and enthusiasm they possess. Helping to rechannel and unleash that vibrant positive life force is one of the most gratifying experiences both an analyst and a layman can have.⁴⁷

4. Conclusion

Seeking answers to the three basic questions we have regarding suicide based on the fundamental structures of hope lead us towards an appreciation of the intrinsic and integral goodness that is there in creation and all human beings, but acknowledge evil and its hurting effects as well. The people I have mentioned who committed suicide are all good persons. All of them were gifted with their own beauty and talents, all were capable of love, all were actually loved and all had lives ahead of them. And so, to witness suicide is to witness goodness destroyed and to see evil, not only in the very act of suicide but also in the despair that may have led to suicide. It is an evil thing when good people fail to acknowledge their own goodness and see themselves as worthless. Despite this stark contrast between good and evil, the fundamental structure of hope points to a reality ever brighter than any human darkness: redemption. God plans to restore and renew all that are hurting, broken and dead. The resurrection is our glimpse of this embodied newness.

As Pope Francis has insisted, “The power in his resurrection will raise us too....It becomes a light that illuminates our personal life and our community.”⁴⁸

It is a light that illuminates the whole cosmos too. N.T. Wright's insistence on the cosmic dimension of hope leads us to realize that the issue of suicide cannot be reduced to an individual issue alone. Everything is communally, socially and cosmically interrelated.

Hence, the goodness of those who committed suicide must be seen in relation to the goodness seen in the grieving community who have shown compassion and concern. Furthermore, the evilness of suicide cannot be reduced to blaming the victim of a sin we can never know if the person had the sufficient amount of freedom and awareness to commit. When we talk about the evilness of suicide, we have to look at ourselves and our culture. What kind of world are we living in and are continuing to make or destroy? What kind of world is this where people kill themselves? What kind of people are we? And when we look at ourselves, we realize that evil has spread among all of us. And so, we are all in need of God's redemption which God, through the Resurrected Christ, gives lovingly without condemnation or condition. This perspective of hope is an impetus for profounder compassion for one another, especially for those among us experiencing the most difficulties.

It is our mission as Church to live this hope and share it. The light of Christ shines forth into the world through his sacrament, the Church.⁵⁰ This is what the Ateneo motto, *Lux-in-Domino*, Light in the Lord, also calls us to be. We must break into the darkness and announce to people that dawn is here.

Rachel Joyce Marie O. Sanchez

Dosen teologi Universitas Ateneo de Manila, Kandidat doctoral di Loyola School of Theology, Ateneo de Manila University, Philippines.

Endnotes

¹ I have written an earlier and less developed version of this paper for my Creation-Sin-Eschatology class under Fr. Macalinao during my masters, but many questions have remained unanswered since then.

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