

Chapter 7

Life-its Dignity and Value



Gianna Beretta Molla is a Catholic, Pro-life saint. She was a simple but significant messenger of divine love. Following the example of Christ, who “having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end” (Jn 13:1), this mother of a family remained heroically faithful to the commitment she made on the day of her marriage. The extreme sacrifice she sealed with her life testifies that those who have courage to give of themselves totally to God and to others are able to lead a life of fulfillment.

Gianna was born in Milan (Italy), in 1922 (October 04). She received Christian education and she willingly accepted the gift of faith. She experienced life as a marvelous gift of God. After earning degree in medicine and surgery, she opened a medical clinic. She specialized in Pediatrics and gave attention to mothers, babies, the elderly and the poor. Gianna Beretta considered the field of medicine a 'mission' and rendered generous service. With simplicity and equilibrium, she harmonized the demands of a mother, wife, doctor and her passion for life.

In 1961 during her pregnancy, she developed a fibroma in uterus. She was conscious of the risk to her continued pregnancy. But she pleaded with the surgeon, to save life of the child she was carrying. A few days before the child was due, although trusting in God's providence, she was ready to give her life to save the child. “If you must decide between mother and the child, do not hesitate; choose the child ...' she told. Despite all efforts and treatments to save both of them, in the morning of April 28, 1962, in untold pain and after repeated exclamation of 'Jesus, I love you', the mother died'.

Conscious immolation, was the phrase used by Pope Paul VI, to define the act of Gianna. A young mother from the diocese of Milan, who, to give life to her daughter, sacrificed her own.

Gianna was beatified on 24 April 1994, during the International year of Family and canonized by Pope John Paul II as a saint, on 16th May 2004. St. Gianna is the patron saint for

mothers, physicians and unborn children.

By her example, we should rediscover the pure, chaste beauty of conjugal love, lived as a response to divine call. We learn how to place ourselves at the service of each person we meet within family and professional lives and thus grow in love and holiness, acknowledging the worth and dignity of human life.

Life- Gift of God

Life is a mystery and gift of God. The very purpose of life makes this world most vibrant. Human life is sacred as it involves the creative action of God. It remains forever in a special relationship with the Creator. God alone is the Lord of life. No one, can under any circumstance, claim the right to destroy an innocent human being. If only we understand the greatness and true worth of life, we will be able to value and protect life and become promoter of the same. Life is a unique gift of God. There are many theories of life. Science tells living matter originated from water and man is the result of evolution. The theory of evolution claims that the earth had changed since its creation. Our universe has proved to be in a constant change and progressive development. This theory further tells that life originated on earth after millions of years long, constant evolution-process. In the background of the Bible, we, the Christians believe that God has created life. He is the only source and end of life. Both science and Bible tell that the theory of the origin of life shall not be taken as contradictory. The Bible gives the answer to the question as to who has created life. The subject of study on the origin of life under science is how life developed. Therefore, the studies presented by both the Bible and science will help us to understand more and more about the value and sanctity of life.

Life is a blessing (Wis. 4:8-9). Though science and religion study the reality at different levels they are concerned with the same thing. Einstein said, "Science without religion is dangerous. Religion without Science is blind." Religion prevents science from falling into materialism and moral nihilism. Both science and Bible will have to help to be more aware on the greatness of life and the need of promoting the same. This study will also make us conscious of our responsibility to protect the nature and every form of life – the flora and fauna, environment, etc. Both science and religion are complementary and not contradictory.

A culture which doesn't encourage to respect and protect life will pose a vital threat to the very existence of life. All the creatures, created by God have a right to exist, survive and grow to its fullness.

Dignity of Man

There is something special and holy about human life. Man is the crown of creation. Human life is different, because we share something of the nature of God. "God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life" (Gen. 2:7). Genesis also says that man is made in the image and likeness of God." So "God created humankind in His image; in the image of God he created them

...” (Gen 1:27). This means that people in some way, are the reflection of God. In humans something of God himself can be seen. Man is different from other forms of life. Man is created with indestructible soul which lives after the body had died (Ps. 139:13-16). So man is given the honour and sanctity to partake directly in the divine life. That's the cause of his dignity and value. Hence life is sacred. Animals do not have souls, no reasoning or thinking power although they deserve to be treated with kindness and respect.

As God loves each person, whether new born, elderly, healthy, sickly, all are members in the same society and are in need of our care. The greatness and dignity of man is revealed to the world with the incarnation of Jesus, the beloved Son of God. Man became more aware that he is called to be the child of God.

When the image and likeness of God in man was tarnished due to sin, Jesus came to redeem man from this lost sanctity through his saving acts by sacrificing his life on the cross. He has brought greater glory to human body by his resurrection from the dead. He gave us a share in his glorious resurrection. By sharing the divine life with man, God has implanted in him a great responsibility – to give life and the duty to protect life and do all that is possible to flourish this divine gift of life.

God has revealed his mind in the 5th commandment, “You shall not kill.” This commandment forbids causing harm to life, directly or indirectly. The great responsibility to protect life is entrusted to humans by God Himself. God has very strongly conveyed His message to protect life when he questioned Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” (Gen. 4:9). We shall keep in mind that any threat to life, whether serious or not is a grave violation of divine commitment. In any given circumstance and at any place, we are bound to protect and respect life.

Respect for Life

Respect shown to human life is indeed the respect given to God, our Creator and end of life. It is the will of God that we respect human life, irrespective of caste, creed or nation. All are human beings worthy of our respect whether they are sick, disabled or marginalized. Anyone who suffers disability is also created by God - a human being of dignity and sanctity! Disability doesn't lessen his humanity. They deserve our special care and protection. It will be a grave sin to neglect those who are disabled, invalid or aged.

There are many opportunities for us to become 'keepers' and protectors of our brethren, neighbours and needy fellowmen. We shall try to become protectors of life with due respect and concern towards others. Saints like, Maximilian Kolbe, Fr. Damien, Gianna Beretta, Blessed Mariyam Theresia and others became saints and people respected them as they were people who cared and safeguarded lives of others. They were inspired by the teachings of Jesus, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends” (Jn 15:13).

Challenges against Life

There are many circumstances which raise challenges, threatening the quality and very existence of human life. On the one hand, we find people running after comforts and luxuries, offered and facilitated by the scientific and technological developments. On the other hand, we can see man submitting himself easily to inordinate desires, growing tensions of families, terrorism, and exploitation of religious sentiments. Due to all these evil tendencies and lust for luxuries and greed we witness many precious lives being lost, day by day, in the midst of the race of power.

In this century, destructive circumstances are growing, supported and encouraged by various and different challenging elements of life. A proper knowledge about those threats, their adverse effects in the society etc will help a true Christian to be a promoter of life by leading an exemplary life.

1. Abortion

It is the deliberate and direct interruption of the generative process of human life. According to the 1980 statistics, each day an average of 30,000 women have a baby and 12,000 have an abortion. This means that for every five live-births in the world, there are two abortions. The Church teaches: human life must be respected absolutely from the moment of conception; from the first moment of its existence, a human being must be recognized as having the rights of a person. The Bible says, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you" (Jer. 1:5).

We read in the Psalms, "My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret intricately woven in the depths of the earth" (Ps. 139:15; Cf. 139:13-14). Since the first century the Church has affirmed the moral evil of every procured abortion. Direct abortion, willed as an end or means is gravely contrary to the moral law: "You shall not kill." In the encyclical, 'Gaudium et Spes' we learn, "God, the Lord of life, has entrusted the 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" (GS. 51:3). Therefore, since it must be treated from conception as a person, the embryo must be defended in its integrity, cared for and healed as far as possible, like any other human beings. We have seen that abortion is the deliberate termination of life in the mother's womb by human intervention. Some people justify abortion as a method of Family Planning and population control but it is, in fact, a killing and a grave sin. Termination of life of an infant who is defenseless and helpless is equal to killing and is a very grave sin. Mother Theresa warns, "No nation that permits abortion can ever progress in the world. The best nation is the one which takes measures to safeguard life of the helpless and defenseless."

As already mentioned - foetus - infant growing in the womb of its mother is also a human being and its life is also precious. It has the right to grow to its fullness. The Vat. II document on "Church in the Modern World" speaks, "Life must be protected with the utmost care from the moment of conception" (Church in the Modern World 51). People resort to abortion when an unexpected pregnancy occurs. There is serious discussion: pregnancy can be inopportune when it is a result of a force, rape or that the continuation of pregnancy would involve a risk to the life of the pregnant woman or when there is substantial risk of the child born, what could be legally and morally justified?

Whatever the reasons advanced abortion results in the death of a weak and helpless human being. Abortion leaves deep psychological and emotional scars on the mother who as a result, could experience serious bouts of depression and hysteria. Abortion would also lead to a general devaluation of life and a regeneration of social and individual morality. To conclude this short discussion we bring a passage from *Abortion, the silent Holocaust*, by John Powell, "Once you permit the killing of an unborn child, there will be no stopping. There will be no age-limit. You are setting off a chain reaction that will, even though, make you the victim. Your children may kill you for they will not want to support you in old age. Your children may need your home and states. If a doctor will take money for killing the innocent in the womb, he will kill you with a needle when paid for your children; this is the terrible nightmare you are creating for the future." Abortion is also called the double death syndrome as it may lead to death of the child and mother. Women die of unsafe abortion every year.

Youth are both the future of the country and the most likely victims of deviations. The traditional values, imparted at home, must be reinforced at school. The dangers of considering sex as the source of irresponsible pleasure must be etched in their minds so that they may realize that reckless behaviour is a one-way-ticket to unhappiness and death. Dangers that threaten the young loom large each day in contemporary India, due to the liberalization of the economic policy and subsequent invasion of Western cultural mores. The economic revolution seems to have set off a 'sexual revolution' on the Indian adolescence circle. This has to be watched and guided in order to bridle those forces that prove catastrophic.

2. Crime of Killing (Homicide)

The crime of killing is the most serious of crimes for which society reserves the strongest punishment. Murder is an extreme crime that engenders special horror. The act of killing is the killing of a human being, unjust way of taking away of human life. The direct killing of an innocent person is the most grievous of sins. It is the violation of the supreme ownership of God over the lives of His creatures. It is also an outrage upon the most cherished and fundamental rights enjoyed by man – right to life.

The fifth commandment forbids direct and intentional killing as gravely sinful. The

murderer and those who co-operate voluntarily in murder commit a sin that cries for justice (Gen 4: 10). Infanticide, fratricide, patricide and murder of a spouse etc are especially grave by reason of the natural bond which they break. The fifth commandment forbids doing anything that indirectly brings about a person's death. The moral law prohibits exposing someone to mortal danger without grave reason, as well as refusing help to a person in danger.

In our times planned violence and killing are alarmingly on the rise. Killing out of revenge or with sinful designs are daily occurrences. Homicide takes place due to greed for power, lust and luxuries. It is the duty of every Christian to rise against the rising crime and violence and to prevent crime of killing innocent persons.

3. Suicide (Terminator Syndroms)

God is our source of life and the sovereign authority over life. We must be thankful for the gift of life and it is our sacred duty to safeguard it. We are only stewards to this divine gift of life entrusted to us. We have no right to inflict any harm or destroy life. So everyone is responsible for his life before God. No doubt, it is God alone who remains the sovereign master of life. We must protect life for His honour and the salvation of our souls. As was mentioned, we are not the owners of the life and it is not ours to dispose the same. Suicide contradicts the natural inclination of humankind to preserve and perpetuate life. It is of course adverse to the just love of self. It also offends love of neighbours because it unjustly breaks the ties of solidarity with family, friends near and dear ones and other human societies to which we continue to have obligations. Suicide is a grave scandal to the society. Voluntary co-operation and leading a person to suicide is a grave violation of the moral law.

Timely care and treatment of persons with suicide tendency can reduce a number of such incidents. It is also necessary to identify and prevent circumstances and reasons leading one to suicide. We shall take care that no one should disturb the eternal plan of our salvation. The church is alert and vigilant to see that no one is perished by resorting to this extreme act of suicide. Our Christian conscience prompts us to pray for God's grace to keep our mind and soul healthy and happy for a peaceful and contented life.

4. Euthanasia (Mercy Killing)

The word 'Euthanasia' comes from the Greek, meaning "good death" (*Eu* = well, *Thanatos* = death), signifying mercy. It refers to the practice of ending life in a manner which relieves pain and suffering. It is a deliberate intervention undertaken with the intention of ending a life, to relieve intractable suffering. It can be categorized as voluntary and non voluntary, active and passive, assisted Euthanasia, etc.

- 1. Voluntary Euthanasia:** It is when the person who is killed has requested to be killed.
- 2. Non Voluntary:** When the person who is killed made no request to be killed.

3. **Assisted:** Someone provides help or guidance for. When it is a doctor who helps – it is physician-assisted.
4. **By Action:** When intentionally causing death, not with the consent of the person suffering. Eg. - Death by giving a lethal injection (an Action).
5. **By Omission:** when intentionally causing death by not providing necessary care, food, water or medicine.

Euthanasia is usually considered to be criminal homicide, when it is active – with the intention of killing by action or omission of a dependent human being for his or her alleged benefit. So, Euthanasia is the process of killing a person who is mentally or physically sick, suffering from an incurable disease without his/her consent. Ending life of a person suffering from a terminal illness can't be considered an act of mercy. It is against dignity of a human being and against moral values. For a Christian, pain and suffering are not always evil. Our Lord Jesus Christ through his suffering, agony and crucifixion has brought about eternal salvation for each and every one of us. So, he regained our lost dignity and added value and sanctity to human suffering. We consider, for example the lives of saints who voluntarily suffered pain, martyrdom and violent death for the sake of others. Therefore, pain and suffering may not be totally evil in all the circumstances. It is consoling to see that there are palliative care centers to give considerable care and relief and bring hope in patients who suffer due to terminal diseases. No doubt our care and loving presence with due kindness can serve a lot in this sphere. This is what Christianity demands from each of us.

5. Use of Drugs

Since the beginning of the recorded history, people have used drugs to provide pleasure, to escape from pain and to get relief from illness. Our time is witnessing a rapid increase in the availability and use of drug. This is due to the rise of technically oriented societies devoted to advances in Chemistry and to the greater production of synthetic substances. The increased use of drugs poses serious threats to the humans. Drugs are substances that influence the function of living tissues. Drugs are powerful agents for either good or harm. Most people tend to abuse drugs due to their soothing, anaesthetizing (Sedative), and stimulating properties. The problems have gained a new dimension with the increased use of narcotics and other drugs. The increased use of drugs has been posing great danger to the physical and psychological health of the users. Addiction to certain habit-forming drugs involves such a compelling desire that the addict becomes a virtual slave to the habit and may begin to use a drug to get relief from pain or fatigue. Before they realize the negative impact, seductive effect, they develop overwhelming desire for drugs. They become so desperate for regular dose that they often resort to crime to get money for the same. The total helplessness of the addict is miserable – no sleep, can't work, can't stop taking

drug and are driven to a stage of madness. The best advice to anybody is: "Don't start." Pleasure, prosperity and comforts are not values which can fill the human heart. Man needs higher ideals to live and work for. If the young people learn to deal with their personal problems with the help of responsible, caring people they will realize that a life can be fruitful without substance of abuse. The pressure of social living attracts people to drug use. The use of alcohol and drugs adversely affect the life and health of the user. It is definitely an obstacle to progress and peaceful family life and the person becomes an enemy to the society. It mars a person's capacity to dispense his ordinary duties. Alcoholic and drug users are generally anti-social and serious violators of the commandment of God. As true Christians, we have the responsibility to create awareness about the adverse use of all kinds of drugs and alcohol. We can also extend sympathetic assistance by co-operating with the organizations working towards de-addiction care and by supporting anti-alcoholic drive by the enlightened pressure groups.

Promotion of pro-Life Culture

While making a reference to the modern world and its culture, it is Pope John Paul II who used the word, 'the culture of death'. Culture of death is the result of the commercialization of life itself. The sins and crime against life, exploitation and misuse of the nature and reforms are all heading towards lust and luxury of man and ultimately violence and violation of ecological balance.

It is our sacred duty to protect and promote human life, controlling the destructive activities. Mankind is being pulled by the culture of death through drug abuse, homicide, suicide, abortion, sponsored crime etc. If society holds human life so cheaply, it is no surprise that young people will also hold life cheaply by engaging in violences. Much in our modern culture, there is something toxic to the life of the human beings. We have become masters by allowing the exploitation of the unborn for our economic and medical gain. Both legal and illegal activities which promote a culture of death reinforce and sustain each other spreading darkness of social conscience. It is our duty as Christians at every opportunity to promote and protect life which is the most fundamental right through works of justice and peace.

We have to renew our conviction that it is time to abandon the illusion that we can protect life by taking life by violent means.

Respect and development of human life require peace. Everything peaceful is the fruit of the prince of peace – Christ (Eph. 2: 14; Mt. 5: 9). We are to renounce violence and bloodshed and to safeguard human rights by our exemplary life and activities and bearing witness to evangelical value. We shall learn to reverse 'evil' by learning to live well. (Reverse to word 'evil' to make the word 'live'). As devoted Christians it is our duty to foster life. The following factors may help us to nurture a culture of life with due reverence.

1. Be aware of the dignity and sanctity of Human Life

As a first step towards the protection and promotion of human life, one should be sufficiently aware and convinced of its value and dignity. If you are ignorant, it may lead you to take life and obligation towards others as mere legality. This mentality may lead one to engage in violence and a culture of death and disrespect to the gift of life. Study classes, media education etc can be arranged in groups to create awareness and to proclaim the dignity of human life.

2. Proclamation of the sanctity of human life

It is not enough that we are simply aware of the importance of human life. We shall be prepared to make others convinced of the importance of human life and the sacred duty to promote the same. People can be enlightened about the same through seminars, study classes, audio-visual and media education.

3. Co-operation in respecting and protecting Life

In order to promote a culture of life it is necessary that we give due respect to others. Whenever programmes are being organized for the promotion of human life, arrange prayer groups. We shall extent full co-operation and ensure our participation.

4. Children, the wealth of Family

Family is the cradle of the culture of life. Children are the extended life of parents and they are to be taken proper care with the strong conviction that life is precious and wonderful gift of God. Children are to be welcomed and accepted happily and helped to grow gracefully inculcating in them moral values and respect for self and others.

5. Engage in Pro- Life Activities

Pro-life activists are promoters of the culture of human life. By way of encouragement and extending support to them we too can contribute much to the good cause of life. Let us try to be the collaborators in the campaign to protect and promote a culture of life as against the culture of death. Thus, we can save the society from the culture of violence and destruction of life, by faithfully following the example and teaching of our Lord, who is life, and life in the abundance.

There is a need for moral regeneration or spiritual renewal of mankind. Spirit of love, mutual respect and peaceful co-existence can help to check up violence and the destructive brute in man. Humankind must awaken from the slumber and discard violence and other base instincts for its own survival. God has created us in His image but he has created us in freedom. Abundance of life depends on the choices and decisions we make and we are free to choose the best or worst. Let s choose life and sow seeds of life. Let us promote life so that all may have abundance of life. That is the glory of God! (Jn 10:10).

Life is priceless; it has to be carefully nurtured. When we are thoughtless and careless we

hurt others by the use of harsh words, rude criticisms and pointless remarks. Such behavior paralyzes life. Love and life beget life. Develop virtues of compassion, kindness, and care for others, forgiveness, tolerance and sense reconciliation for a peaceful co-existence.

I. Let us Discuss

1. Scientific and Biblical views presented on the origin of life are not contradictory but they are complementary.
2. Christians are duty bound to promote a culture of life.

II. Let us find out the Answers

1. Life is a precious gift from God. Explain?
2. Why human beings are different from the rest of the creation?
3. How can we develop reverence towards human life?
4. What are the different challenges against human life?
5. What all things are to be done to foster a culture of life?

III. Activity

Prepare a colash on the 'promotion of a culture of life.'

IV. Let us Read and Reflect

Psalms 139: 13-24.