THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH

As a nation Jamaica has come to a truly sorry and tragic pass. Not even our children are safe anymore. From 2003 until now, 398 children have been killed, some of whom have been savagely raped before being brutally murdered. It’s bad enough—truly wrong—to take another person’s life, but when we start making children and the defenseless elderly “fair game,” the society has reached the nadir of existence. Some of us have become despicable barbarians with cold, calculating hearts—a far cry from our innate Jamaican values and way of life. The outcry from pulpit, parliament, verandahs, and bars has been one of outrage. The cry that is heard in not a few homes is one of “wailing and loud lamentation: Rachel weeps for her children. She refuses to be comforted, for they are no more” [Jer 30:15; Matt. 2:18].

The culture of violence and death seems to be contending with the culture of life, and it’s up to each Jamaican to pause and ask whence this recent mode of barbarity that is worse than any hurricane or flood. We are content with crying “shame” and “outrage,” but that is not enough. Not even the politicians’ master plan—if there is such a plan—to contain this culture of violence and death is sufficient. Were we only to focus “out there” to identify the origin of this sad state of affairs, we would perhaps be touching only the tip of the iceberg.

We must look within ourselves for the causes of the problem. Although we delude ourselves to think that we are on top of things by saying, “JAMAICA, NO PROBLEM, MON!” the truth of the matter is that a good part of the problem is within. Therefore, we must go way beneath the tip of the iceberg. Unfortunately we surround ourselves with all sorts of distraction, noise and entertainment (the “bread and circus” routine!). We shy away from any introspection that would spur us on to tackle the problem and come up with effective actions to help remedy this sad situation in which
we find ourselves. The Epistle of James points in the direction of introspection: “What causes these fights and quarrels among you? Is it not your inner longings which make war within your own selves? When you long for something which you cannot have, you kill for it, and when you do not get what you desire, you squabble and fight” [Jas. 4: 1 – 2].

We can point fingers at one another, at this or that political Party, to lay the blame—not that we should not demand accountability for good governance from our public servants, inclusive of National Security—but until we all see ourselves as part of the problem, we will not begin to see the way forward in terms of solutions. Genuine introspection would also lead to impartial non-partisan critique and solutions, for it is not a JLP or PNP problem/solution. It is a national scourge and we must recognize that unless all are involved all will be consumed.

Each of us must ask these questions of self: “How do I contribute—wittingly or unwittingly—to this monster of violence and death, from whose fangs drips the blood of the innocent?” “Do I take seriously the life issues that threaten the legacy fought for and willed by ‘our fathers’/mothers’ hands?” Once we nonchalantly treat (or dismiss) those basic life issues because of the dominant pleasure principle of life, or begin to tamper with any of those issues, we open wide a welcoming door to the monster. Be they crimes of passion, rape or incest, carnal abuse, abortion, euthanasia, mob – killings in the name of justice or capital punishment—they all promote the culture of violence and death.

Having sown the seeds of indifference or “don’t-care attitude,” we now reap the harvest of violence and death. Again, we ask the question: “How is it that it’s only now that we have become enraged, as if we, as a nation, were as Rip Van Winkle asleep all these years?” We cannot claim ignorance! The media are awash with the brutal descriptions of innocent lives being snuffed out. But has it ever dawned on us that that is exactly what we do when we opt for abortion? Is it only the child murdered
outside the womb that should evoke from us the lamentation of “Rachel?” Should not the murder of all innocents be lamented? We are dealing with an attitude towards life in general—a package deal as it were—an inclusively woven seam of existence. Too, the other end of the spectrum of innocent life shows the elderly poor being abused and abandoned—a dreadful indictment on the level of civilization that now obtains in Jamaica. That also must be lamented!

This inclusive understanding of life is the way forward, for we are talking about an unbroken fabric of life. One cannot safeguard one type of human life and put at risk another, or dismiss it as if it’s disposable. This is hypocrisy, plain and simple! The culture of life that we wish to promote ought to be one that furthers the full potential of any one individual and all individuals. The ministries practiced by the Mustard Seed Communities, the Missionaries of the Poor, Mother Teresa’s Sisters of Charity, and the Salvation Army are poignant reminders of the sacredness of every single life. Once we break that common, seamless cloak of life, we open a Pandora’s box, which is exactly what we have at the present moment.

On the other hand, when we embrace the notion of the common good, inclusiveness includes the sound and the infirm, the elderly and the unborn, the child and the youth, the poor and the rich, the law-abiding and the criminal. Even when justice is administered in the case of the latter, a modicum of respect for life must be adhered to, if the seamless cloak of life—which is sacred, though somewhat soiled—is to be safeguarded for the good of all. The familiar song, “No Man Is an Island” sums up that inclusive, common good: “each man’s joy is joy to me; each man’s grief is my own.” How do we get from the culture of violence and death to a culture of life? That is a difficult and arduous process! Then, again, nothing good comes easy.

A new way of thinking and new attitudes must be cultivated if we are to contribute positively to a much-desired transition from the culture of
violence and death to the culture of life. This is a long-haul process requiring tough decisions on all fronts that will address the causes—not the symptoms—of crime and violence, especially in our cities where our traditional values of care and concern are sacrificed upon the altar of expediency and greed. Is this utopian? Perhaps! But I would rather consider this desired transformation the ultimate of our Judeo-Christian heritage that must be rescued and lived in our everyday living experience. A complex problem is not remedied by a simple solution. Families, Churches, the private sector, the media, and government must work in close collaboration if the tide is to be turned. And turn it must if we are to safeguard the mere minimum of civilization!

Families. Clearly the crux of the problem we now face is the breakdown of family life in its various forms, the majority of which are either dysfunctional or estranged; this is the bane of family life. Compounding that scenario is poverty and unemployment. Single-parent families—no matter how valiant such parents may be—are not the ideal; children need both parents, at least to be able to know and identify with the absent parent. A first step...perhaps a baby-step is the introduction in Parliament of measures to have mandatory DNA testing to establish paternity, thereby ensuring that each child’s right to two named parents becomes a reality. Hopefully this will result in the reduction in numbers of “deadbeat dads” who, unidentified, refuse to assume their responsibility.

Also, parents who shirk their duty to instill in their under-aged children desirable patterns of behaviour (e.g., parents whose permissiveness lead to children’s roaming the streets late at nights) should be held accountable, possibly with the imposition of a fine. On the other hand, it may very well be that the “roaming” is occasioned by poor housing and hygienic conditions where minors (and even adults) go home only to fall asleep immediately in order to avoid reflecting upon their subhuman situations. Should not government have a role to play where those caught in the vise of poverty and poor housing cannot extricate themselves without some
assistance? Is the National Housing Trust or any other government entity adequately equipped to help pry this vise?

Young Unemployed. It is said that most of those who are prone to engage in criminal activities range between the ages of eighteen (18) and thirty-five (35). One can understand that poverty and unemployment are the ingredients of both hopelessness and anti-social behavior, the former fueling the latter, and especially so if these youth are unskilled. Could not a National Youth Service (assisted by the Defense Force) having a skills training component, be utilized to inculcate discipline among and impart a trade to these young unemployed? Or, again, could the present HEART/NYS programmes be expanded in order to train or re-socialise those youth who are unattached and are looking for a way out of the “valley of the shadow of death?”

Such programmes should be enriched with a Christian world-view that promotes values and attitudes consonant with good, productive citizenship. Overwhelming, in terms of cost, isn’t it? But not to think outside the box in this present situation will be costlier yet in the long run, with many more lives lost and a headlong rush towards the precipice of anarchy. Would it be asking too much of the private sector to invest in a better tomorrow by assisting financially with such programmes? The objective of this venture is the transformation of our youth into men and women proud of their innate dignity and full of hope. The indirect benefit could be an increase in good workmanship and productivity.

The Role of Churches.
What might be the role of our Churches in this transformational effort? Aside from handing on Christian values which are the spin-off of any faith commitment, more could be done in terms of systematic moral education and responsible parenting. That said, could they not envision a holistic approach to ministry comparable to that practised for years at Bethel Baptist Church at Half-Way-Tree, which includes counseling, among a
myriad of other services for the well-being of the total person (spiritual, psychological and physical)? Such a holistic approach to ministry can only be made possible by responsible stewardship of talent, time and treasure. Again, because most Churches operate on a slim budget, could not government assist in the waiver of certain stringent measures to facilitate the legitimate procurement of goods and materials needed for such a holistic ministry? In addition, for Churches who own schools, a periodic critiquing of their curricula is necessary to ascertain if the values and attitudes cultivated in such institutions are life-giving or death-dealing. Of course, all this precludes any notion of proselytizing in a multi-faith school community, for respect for others and their faith belief is one of the values that must be inculcated in our schools.

The Role of the Media.
The various media—printed and electronic—have a crucial obligation to assist in this task of transformation from a culture of violence and death to one of life. The values they convey, the photos and pictures they project upon the impressionable minds of their young audience will either perpetuate the dominant pleasure principle (that fosters selfish, death-dealing behaviour and activities) or the common good that promotes the transcendental of beauty, truth, and goodness. Surely, there ought to be a distinction between Art and downright slackness in portraying human sexuality and morality.

The culture of violence and death (with all its monstrosities) must give way to the culture of life, if we are to survive in this corner of God’s vineyard. Life is sacred and has been given in trust by the Creator for a purpose. Death was not in the scheme of God’s plan for human beings—only life. This seamless cloak of life, applicable to all, demands a struggle, not unlike the struggle to bring into existence a new-born baby. Indeed, our Saviour did state the raison d’être of his coming into the world: “I have come that they may have life, and have it in all its fullness (more abundantly)” [John 10:10]. It’s obvious that we are a far way from that “fullness of life,” but we
must never give up the hope that God, through us, can breathe the breath of life into our “dry bones.” Convinced of the purpose of the Saviour’s incarnation, and armed with his Spirit, we should not stand by silent and idle, and let violence and death trump peace and life. Because of the Author of Life, who trumped death with his resurrection, we shall...we must overcome!

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10 October 2008