

Looking at the Reality of “*jishi*” (Suicide)

Circumstances behind this theme

In September 2010, the Committee for Social Awareness of Caritas Japan changed its name from the Social Welfare Committee in order to indicate more clearly the aims and sphere of our activities. This Committee focuses on the issue of poor people and those who are placed in vulnerable positions and faced with threat of living without human dignity, feels compassion for their suffering and pain, and by doing so, sends messages based on the Gospel inside and outside of the Church.

In reality, the Committee for Social Awareness has been coping with the issues beyond the boundary of “social welfare activities” up to now. This committee has been addressing the issue of violence and abuse since 2005, and taking up “suicide and isolation” as a theme since summer of 2007. Committee members working in various fields came up with the common problem, “isolation”, after considering together the suffering and pain existing in current society. The most tragic conclusion of isolation is clearly “suicide”. Amid such discussion we decided to find out the reality of suicide in Japan. In November 2008 the open study session on “suicide and isolation” was held in Tokyo.

The word “*jishi*” (suicide)

We use the Japanese word “*jishi*” instead of “*jisatsu*”, both of which mean suicide in English. Because the word “*jisatsu*” has a nuance of blaming suicide victims, we thought the more neutral word “*jishi*” was more appropriate. We have gradually figured out that suicide victims are not “those who chose to die by themselves”, but rather “those who are driven into a corner having no choice but to die”. Of course, the word “*jisatsu*” is also currently used with the same meaning. However, the word “*jishi*” is commonly used so that prejudice against suicide is reduced and persons connected with suicide can easily talk about this issue. Especially, the word “*jishi-izoku*” (bereaved family of suicides) is commonly used, concerning the feelings of bereaved families. Therefore, we use the words “*jishi*”, “*jisisha*”(suicide victim), “*jisi-izoku*” as much as possible, while we use the word “*jisatsu*” for technical administrative or legal terms, such

as “*jisatu-taisaku*”(anti-suicide measures) and “*jisatu-yobo*”(suicide prevention).

Suicide is not a personal problem.

The lecturer of the open study session was Mr. Yasuyuki Shimizu, chairman of Life Link; Center for Suicide Prevention Measures, a nonprofit organization. We learned a lot from his speech based on *White Paper on Suicide 2008* published by Life Link.

- Over 30,000 persons committed suicide every year in Japan since the end of 1988 when many companies went bankrupt due to the blast of bubble economy. The main reasons for suicide of middle-aged men were economic problems.
- Depressed patients commit suicide in many cases, but there are other various factors causing suicides. In other words, the depression measures alone cannot fully respond to all aspects of the suicide issue.
- When it comes to suicides, each region has its own various characteristics of age, gender and vocation. Therefore suicide measures according to the respective region’s needs are necessary.

At the end of his lecture, Mr. Shimizu also pointed out that there was a possibility that the number of suicides increases due to the economic situation after the Lehman Shock at the end of 2008.

In January 2009, when the media broadly reported “firing of temporary workers” and “New Year’s villages for temporary workers”, the Episcopal Commission for Social Issues of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Japan announced “Urgent Appeal for Protection of Human Lives 2009” in order to prevent as much as possible dying on the streets and suicides. Along with this appeal, Caritas Japan called for Emergency Contribution to Save Lives, because the reality, in which tens of thousands of people lost both jobs and housing and a lot of people even lost their lives, was equal to a serious disaster, or an emergency humanitarian crisis. The collected contributions amounted to approximately 30 million yen as of the summer of the same year. The contributions were used for activities to support homeless people, suicide prevention measures, activities to support children of closed foreigners’ schools, and aid to those who are applying for refugee status without livelihood

assistance.

The government's suicide measures have also become substantial. The Basic Act on Suicide Prevention was enacted in 2006, and the Comprehensive Suicide Measures Act was approved at a Cabinet meeting in 2007. What was clearly recognized in these acts was that suicide was not merely a personal matter, and that society was responsible for individuals' suicides because there were various social factors behind suicides. Various local governments also started to take suicide measures afterward.

Awareness as the Catholic faithful

Thinking of the issue of suicide, we came up with a question, "What is our awareness as the Catholic faithful about suicide?" In Christianity, it is commonly taught as follows.

— We must respect life given by God. We must not terminate our own lives. Such act is a mortal sin against God. —

Such teaching was certainly meant to respect lives and eliminate suicides. However, because only the viewpoint of "being a sin" was emphasized, attempted suicides and bereaved families of suicides could be driven into a corner, or talking about suicides could become taboo as a result. Based on such reflection, this Committee conducted the Survey on Concerns about Suicide in the Catholic Church in summer of the year 2009.

The survey includes a question, "What do you think of suicide?" We were bewildered at questioning if suicide was a sin or not. It is not a simple question easily answered by saying "Yes" or "No". There is no exact answer either. However, by addressing this question, we tried to ask once again the awareness of the Catholic faithful about suicide. There were various answers. Even if suicide were defined as a sin, the number of suicides would not decrease, and the suffering of persons connected with suicides or bereaved families would increase. Conversely, Even if suicide were not defined as a sin, the issue of suicides would not be solved, and the suffering of persons concerned or bereaved families would not be eased.

What was surprising about the survey's result was that about a half of respondents answered that they have a connection to suicide. Many people

filled their response sheets with their experiences and their thoughts. And we felt all the more the depth of suicide experiences.

Changes in the times and the teaching of the Church

— All men are enlivened by God. Therefore, every life in this world should be respected. However, bodily death is not the end of everything. People come to God through death. Living eternal life of God is the final goal of the human journey. —

This is the core of Christian faith. The Christian viewpoint on suicide is based on this belief. Humans must not desecrate their own lives or lives of others in any case. Properly speaking, suicide should not have existed. It is said that in Christian nations there were fewer suicides throughout history. If some people in Japanese society beautify death, or neglect lives, we must say clearly “No” to them.

On the other hand, the reality surrounding suicide has become very severe. It has become increasingly clear that most suicides were committed not by free will, but because the persons concerned were driven into a corner having no choice but to die. Under such circumstances, the rules and teachings of the Church have changed. According to the traditional teaching of the Church, suicide is a sin because people commit suicide as the result of rejecting Christian faith and choosing to die by their free will. However, it is recognized today that suicides are not a matter of personal ethical decision but a social issue as well as a mental problem which cannot be assumed by personal responsibility. The Church declared that those who committed suicides also have hope for the eternal salvation and the Church prays for persons who have taken their own lives (1).

“Reverence for Life”, a Message for the Twenty-First Century from the Catholic Bishops of Japan stated as follow:

“62. God is just, but also merciful. We wonder about people whose life in this world has ended. “How does God judge them?” “How does God see it?” The answer is a mystery that transcends human understanding. We should leave judgment to God who knows all. When we consider the complicated reality of

our world and human weakness, we believe that God's mercy is richly poured out upon those who have committed suicide.

Sadly, the Church's position that "suicide is a mortal sin against God who is the Lord of life" has been cold, judgmental and discriminatory. We admit that and repent.

Therefore, we appeal to each and every member of the Church to offer funeral Masses and prayers for the deceased who need God's mercy and forgiveness and for the bereaved who need comfort and encouragement."

When this message was announced, suicide was regarded as a personal issue, but this message was valuable because it appealed to people to feel the suffering of persons connected with suicide and treat suffering people with compassion. Has this appeal reached every corner of the Catholic Church? According to the responses to our survey, it seems that the prejudice and discrimination against suicides and their bereaved families have not vanished in reality.

With compassion to the suffering of persons connected with suicide

Under such circumstances, we, the Committee for Social Awareness of Caritas Japan would like to appeal the following points to the Catholic Church as a whole.

- (1) Let us pay attention to this issue disregarding the taboo, and talk about it in the Church. Let us also offer prayers and funeral Masses for those who committed suicide so that we can share the suffering of bereaved families.
- (2) The Church should become a place where people, who are driven into a corner to die, can talk about their troubles and suffering. Let us listen to the voices of those people. It is also important to provide places where persons who want to die can talk with and support each other.
- (3) If possible, let us establish a center where people can talk about their mental or livelihood problems, or at least introduce various counseling centers (2).
- (4) Let us keep on sending the message, "Even so, we want you to live".
- (5) The Church should offer places where bereaved families can share their

suffering and sorrow together. If the deceased and their families are Catholic, they might be suffering a sense of guilt and prejudice. Therefore, gatherings of bereaved families are necessary in the Catholic Church.

According to the Christian faith, life given by God is respected. Therefore, we are deeply concerned about the reality that over 30 thousand people have taken their own lives every year for 12 consecutive years in Japan. And we cannot be indifferent to this issue, either.

The fundamental attitude of the Church to the modern world is stated in the beginning of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes* of the Second Vatican Council (1965) as follows:

“The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts.”

Having this attitude as a basis, we cannot simply say “Suicide is a sin”. It is commonly said that when someone says “I want to die”, the person is actually saying “I want to live” deep down inside. Has the Church become the place to hear such voices? If it is thought that the Church only offers sermons such as “Do not die” and “You must live” in response to inquiries, who will consult the Church? Isn’t it necessary all the more that we accept as it is the suffering to the extent that they want to die?

The Church is a gathering of people who believe that all men are precious sons of God and thus brothers and sisters to each other, and who seek to live together with mutual support. Many specialists who have been dealing with the issue of suicide point out that there is always the problem of isolation behind suicides. The fundamental reason for committing suicide is a condition in which one believes that he or she is not connected to anyone, and circumstances which force them to believe so. We believe that the important challenges of the Church today are to fight against isolation, and to create communities in which people are connected and support each other under God.

The Committee for Social Awareness of Caritas Japan is going to make this appeal to people both inside and outside of the Church, and support any initiatives on suicide in every diocese or region as much as possible.

Committee for Social Awareness, Caritas Japan

References

(1) *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992) states as follows, although it defines suicides as evil:

“Grave psychological disturbances, anguish, or grave fear of hardship, suffering, or torture can diminish the responsibility of the one committing suicide.

We should not despair of the eternal salvation of persons who have taken their own lives. By ways known to him alone, God can provide the opportunity for salutary repentance. The Church prays for persons who have taken their own lives”(2282~2283).

Formerly the Code of Canon Law included the canons which prohibited celebrating funeral Masses for those who committed suicide and burying them in cemeteries of the Church (Can. 1240 [1] 3, Can.2350, 1917). However, in the current Code of Canon Law (1983) these canons were eliminated with emphasis on pastoral responses.

(2) Refer to the website of “Counseling Centers to support lives” of the Suicide Prevention Center in the National Center of Neurology and Psychiatry (NCNP): <http://ikiru.ncnp.go.jp/ikiru-hp/ikirusasaeru/idex.html>