Columns
Spirituality



During a mission journey to the village of Santa Namaya in the Mexican state of Michoacán, a group of children gather to receive training on the integration of feelings from a group of volunteers. (Courtesy of Jetsa Figueroa)



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August 24, 2023

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I am currently assigned to Morelia, Michoacán, Mexico. Recently, we have been shocked by the alarming reality of high suicide rates among young people here. A niece of one of our friends committed suicide just last month, and her family is devastated. This tragic news raises numerous concerns for us as Verbum Dei Missionary Fraternity members. Why are so many teenagers and young people taking their own lives? What would drive them to take such a radical step?

We cannot evangelize without addressing the concrete realities that people are facing. As we go from town to town proclaiming the good news of the Gospel, I am reminded how Jesus promised us an abundant life (John 10:10). How can Jesus' message reach these young people's hearts? How can we assure them that life is truly abundant? How can we, as missionaries, respond to this devastating reality knocking on our doors?

Now, the theme of spreading a suicide-prevention culture is front and center in all of our initiatives. Although we already support various teenagers in receiving additional support through access to specialized care, we recognize that a huge challenge lies ahead. Nonetheless, we are clear in our aim: to do all we can to promote this culture of suicide prevention!

While researching youth suicide, I discovered its connection to depression, which brings deep sadness, profound unhappiness, a loss of meaning in life, and isolation. Depression causes young people to become less and less interested in their schooling and hobbies. In addition, many cannot express and articulate their feelings, fears, and doubts. For this reason, I see the need to talk openly and honestly with them about the importance of mental health and general well-being. Unfortunately, mental health is a taboo topic for many young people in this part of Mexico. Therefore, in our groups, retreats, and other activities, it is all the more crucial that we provide young people with a good mental health education.

A strong sense of belonging is essential for everyone, especially for young people. When we feel that we do not belong, that we do not have a place, and that we are not accepted and welcomed for who we are in our families, by our friends, and by

society — our overall sense of well-being, happiness and hope decreases. Human beings were created with a deep yearning to belong, to be loved by others and to love in return. This yearning must be fulfilled because we cannot live without love. Therefore, feeling rejected, unwanted and unwelcome can leave a significant scar on our hearts. In each person who commits suicide, we discover a broken, hurting soul who has lost all hope and the will to live.

Some teenagers I have met have lost their hope for a better life. They have many questions. Why should I apply myself at school when there are fewer employment opportunities? Why continue striving for the future in a world of insecurities and violence?

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The first thing I need to do is to be available and to listen. I need to truly listen in order to understand their questions and what these young people are living. Often, people need someone who will freely and generously give their time to them to offer an open, listening and nonjudgmental ear.

The second step is to address their needs and the topics that are most important to them. These include: Where can one find meaning in life? How can we better manage stress? How can we integrate our feelings in a healthy way? How can I connect with myself? We often offer prayer as one such means. Some teenagers want to learn how to pray and be in touch with the source of peace and happiness that dwells within each of them. It's amazing to see them recover their desire to live a more rewarding life through a growing relationship with Jesus and supported by the appropriate accompaniment. God's love heals their wounds and offers them a stronger, deeper hope.

It has been an incredible gift to be able to promote this culture of suicide prevention through our community's unique charism of prayer and preaching the word of God in such a practical way! We go from town to town offering formation, workshops on prayer, personal accompaniment, and peer support groups that we call Revisions of Life. These peer support groups are spaces in which young people can express and share their faith as well as the joys and challenges they face, discovering and building a mutual support network.

As consecrated Verbum Dei Missionaries, we are part of a wider missionary family, also composed of lay members, to whom we give formation so that they can also participate in the mission of evangelization. Some of our community's lay members, who are qualified psychologists and psychiatrists, volunteer their professional skills and expertise to accompany the youth. Together as a missionary family, we are paving new paths of evangelization. What fills me with the most joy is that some young people are also generously volunteering to share their experiences and testimonies with other teenagers. They are responding to the call that is present in every human being to live for God and to serve others.

It is essential that we offer new perspectives of hope and happiness to our young people; after all, they are the hope of our country and the world. In the words of Pope Francis in Fratelli Tutti, they are the "Now of God." We cannot wait for tomorrow for them to live — to live life to the fullest. We have a long journey and much work ahead of us; there are still many towns and cities waiting for the word of God to be preached to them. We have many more young people to reach. So, what about you? Are you called to give your time freely in some way? Would you like to use your life and talents to build a better world? We all have something to offer, no matter how small.

Your words can be a beacon of light for someone walking down a path of doubt and confusion, someone who may be waiting to hear: Please do not give up! Let us join Mario Benedetti, an Uruguayan writer, in proclaiming to young people: "Don't give up; you still have time to reach up and start anew, accept your shadows, bury your fears, free your burdens, fly again." We do so because we want our youth to soar high.

This column was originally published in Spanish June 7, 2023.