Columns
Spirituality



Kenyan authorities retrieve bodies from shallow graves April 27 on an 800-acre ranch in Kilifi County. Up to 300 victims were followers of the Good News International Church Pastor Paul Mackenzie, who told his followers to pray and fast to meet Jesus and they starved to death. A second pastor in Kenya, Ezekiel Odero, was charged in a separate mass killing of his followers. (OSV News/Moses Mpuria, courtesy Sheshi Visual Arts)



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Lately, I have awakened feeling so peaceful, with a joy whose source I cannot explain. I happened to be leading prayer in my community at the time. One of the psalms for that day read: "Awake my soul, awake lyre and harp, I will wake up the dawn" (Psalms 57: 8-10). At this phrase, my heart filled with hope and life. How good to be alive in spirit so that I can praise God! I became aware of a desire to live for God, a call to surrender myself to God in return for what life has given me.

But it nearly feels wrong to feel joyful when my country, Kenya, is going through one of the hardest times in her history.

Among the issues contributing to this situation is the phenomenon of mass killings in the "name of God." More than 400 people have been killed in two cases in which pastors promised that they would see God. According to news reports, In one instance, Kenyans were lured to give up everything they had and go to where the pastor directed, then fasted — which was actually starving to death. Worse still, the majority of the victims were women and children. This has been a real horror as we watched bodies being exhumed on television.

This experience confirms for me that we live in a world of polarities. On one pole I see somebody thirsting for and seeking God earnestly, and on the other I see some greedy person taking advantage of others' naiveté — luring them to sell everything and bring him the money to enrich himself. I think these pastors are interested only in the wealth of the innocent people seeking God.

What saddens me more is that some of those who lost their lives were well-educated people expected to enlighten others. How could they be so vulnerable? At this, I recall the words of Hosea 4:6: "My people perish for want of knowledge." This reveals that, though they can enrich our perception of reality, academic qualifications do not necessarily shield anyone from falling prey to schemes like this. We all have unique knowledge and should enlighten each other from our specific expertise and our lessons from life experiences.

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When I was growing up, speaking up about what I knew was considered showing off, acting like a know-it-all, unless I was asked. This reveals another aspect: I might not enlighten others about some things happening, even when I see the trend, and keep quiet for fear of being seen as one dominating the conversation. So, the dilemma remains: Do I speak or do I keep quiet and let each one mind their own business?

There is still another problem with raising awareness, and this seems to be abused: As our society advances and human rights are emphasized, it has become very difficult to challenge some of the behaviors that are life threatening to both the perpetrator and the victim. In matters of religion, the perpetrators assert their right to form associations, and the victims defend their right to the freedom of worship. An observer might wonder: If I intervene will I not appear to be infringing on others' rights? And so the matter is left unattended. There are many aspects to this matter of cults, and the radicalization and brainwashing (for lack of better words to describe some of these faith-based associations that are arising.)

Aware that our society is laden with many problems it becomes hard for many souls to awake the dawn with lyre and harp! It creates a "Babylonian moment" analogous to when the exiled Israelites were asked by their captors to sing one of their songs (Psalms 137:3-4). How could anyone sing in a foreign land, especially when jobless, not knowing where the next meal will come from, with a family languishing in poverty and sickness? Meanwhile, others are working hard, in vain, to grow rich quickly.

In this case, the prosperity gospel (the concept that a person who has optimistic thoughts and contributes to the church is assured wealth, health and happiness in return) comes in handy for those whose faith is not solid — making them victims of circumstance. There is a tendency to wish our problems would go away, causing some people to look for ways to take away problems instantly.

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Should we follow God for his unconditional love, or pursue a faith path that we hope will make us rich or take away problems instantly? For instance, people are misled into praying for the sick to get well without using conventional medicine, or praying to become rich after giving so much to a faith leader.

Taking this path has led many to become victims of circumstance in a given situation. Sometimes the encounter has ended tragically, as in the Kenyan Shakahola massacre. Such occurrences call for action and — even better — prevention.

True religion preserves life. Jesus protected life. Every encounter with him was a life-giving moment. However, many people have been deceived; they are not able to tell a true shepherd from a false one. We are told of Jesus the Good Shepherd: "… when he came out, he saw a great multitude and was moved with compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So, he began to teach them many things" (Mark 6:34). This is our call today as Christians and consecrated persons. We are followers of Christ and are to do as he did, to save our brothers and sisters who are falling in the wrong hands due to ignorance.

Jesus never shied away from teaching the truth — after all, he came that we may have life and have it to the full. Therefore, let us come out boldly and condemn the evil of blind faith. Mainstreaming awareness of the presence of such things as radicalization, brainwashing and cults needs to become part of our evangelization agenda. We have the privilege of meeting people of all walks of life, and therefore we have no excuse for not creating awareness of the existence of these "signs of our times" that destroy life.

If you are afraid you are dominating conversations when enlightening people, you will be surprised to learn the impact your words have. Rights come with responsibilities, so we have to watch for when these rights are violated.

Let us be our brothers' and sisters' keeper. May we have the spirit of St. Paul the apostle. He was always teaching the people he encountered. He made journeys and wrote several letters because he cared enough to enlighten, to admonish and to affirm.

Why not us? The more we take an interest in the vulnerable of our society, the more we manifest lived love. Let us hold their hands so that they can also awake the lyre and harp and wake up the dawn, no matter their life situations.