Voices of Sisters
Ministry



Ursuline Sr. Tisy Jose (second from right) and Sr. Ranjana Thomas (right), principal of Mariampur School in Kanpur, India, celebrate with students Christmas as the festival of life on Dec. 22, 2022. (Courtesy of Tisy Jose)



by Sr. Tisy Jose

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The global glow of the 2022 Christmas celebration — with its candles and shining trees, colorful Santas and flying reindeer, gifts and cakes — has faded. However, time cannot diminish the core message of Christmas: Human life is precious. Christmas is the most life-affirming "birthday party" human history has ever witnessed. The birth of Jesus — the Lord of life — in the simple Bethlehem stable brought new life to the world and gave a new direction to human history.

Dissolving distance and social class, he drew shepherds and kings. Jesus nurtured, defended and blessed life as he went about doing good.

He spoke of himself as the "resurrection and the life" (John 11:25), the "bread of life" (John 6:35); and as bringing the "light of life" (John 8:12), "abundant life" (John 10:10) and words of "spirit and life" (Jn 6:63).

The new standard of conduct that Jesus set for his followers, the parables of mercy he taught his disciples and his law of love — all were oriented toward nurturing life and upholding its dignity and beauty.

Today, we live in a world where human lives are being destroyed by war, abortion, euthanasia, the death penalty, terrorism, religious bigotry, criminalized politics, human trafficking, and suicides. The message of life that Christmas sends is a wake-up call to humanity.



Children enact the Nativity during a celebration of Christmas as the festival of life Dec. 22, 2022, at Mariampur School in Kanpur, India. (Courtesy of Tisy Jose)

In India, the increasing trend of student suicide in the wake of examinations should shake us, make us sit up and ask ourselves what they are doing and why.

We put a fence around crops to protect them. Children are supposed to be protected by their parents, but because of the undue parental expectations that their children receive top marks in examinations, some who fail to make it to the top get depressed and kill themselves.

Even after witnessing such tragic deaths, some parents pretend to be unaware of them. The guardians entrusted to guard and nurture life play ostrich, bury their heads in the sand, and turn a blind eye to young lives being nipped in the bud.

In the wake of such suicides, the wailing parents, grief-stricken siblings, crestfallen educators and distraught civil authorities all share the guilt of getting their priorities wrong. Instead of giving the first priority to the life of the young students and secondarily to their performance in examinations, these guardians of the young get it backward, putting performance first and life second.

The surging rate of student suicides across India in the aftermath of getting the results of their exams is to be blamed on the overemphasis on grades in our educational system, the unreasonable expectations of parents, and the depression resulting from a poor mental health system, societal stigmas and poverty in this country.

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Not long ago, I had the misfortune of witnessing one tragic incident.

The train came to a screeching halt. A swarm of crowd thronged around. "Suicide," muttered the people in hushed voices.

"Rita, my daughter, my daughter" howled a heartbroken mother from the crowd. The police rushed in and took charge of the body. I grabbed the inconsolable mother immediately to soothe her pain. Without delay, her husband whisked her away to

their home.

On my return to the convent, the sisters broke the sad news to me: A Class XII student from a neighboring school had died by suicide because she had not made the top in her board examination. Clueless that I had witnessed the tragic scene, they wondered about my unusual silence.

The heartrending news hit the newspaper headlines the following day, not as a one-time occurrence but as just one more addition to the spiraling student suicides that resulted when the exam results came out for schools and colleges across India.

The publication of exam results in this country provokes a spectrum of reactions. Most who got top grades are euphoric; those who get average marks accept their scores. But some students who fall short of their parents' expectations put an end to their lives!

Suicide isn't a favorite topic for discussion, but we can't ignore the message. World Suicide Prevention Day — initiated in 2003 by the International Association for Suicide Prevention — is in September. The triennial theme for 2021-23 is "Creating Hope Through Action."

No country is free of suicides, nor does this tragic act discriminate against age, gender, religion, or economic status. Statistics tell a shocking story. The World Health Organization (WHO) says: "An estimated 703,000 people a year take their life around the world. For every suicide, there are likely 20 other people making a suicide attempt and many more have serious thoughts of suicide."

India's National Crime Records Bureau Report noted that more than 1.6 lakh (a lakh=100,000) people in India died by suicide in 2021, which was 7.2% more than 2020.

Driven by the grave issue of student suicides in India, we educators of Ursuline schools and colleges recently gathered at a meeting and drew up a Life-Saving Action Plan where life skills top all other learning skills: "Life is precious: Live and help live." The dictum began to seep through daily morning assemblies, moral science classes and co-curricular activities.

The teaching-learning process in our educational institutions was tilted in favor of life rather than just academic excellence. In creating "hope" through "action," a well-

qualified counselor and a psychiatrist were made available to the students.

To top it all off, a student group named Ambassadors of Hope was formed, with each member adequately trained in the art of instilling hope in their peers if they found them depressed.

A set of value-based actions — listening to the other with compassion, showing mutual respect, and replacing cutthroat competition with collaboration and goodwill — were introduced as life-boosting practices in our schools. Essay writing on topics such as the sanctity of life, "Live and help live," and "Defend life and nurture it" were made part of English composition in higher classes.



Ursuline Sr. Tisy Jose brings home to her students the preciousness of life described in two books: Gitanjali by Rabindranath Tagore, the poet-mystic of India, and the story of Ursuline Mother Brigida, who nurtured the lives of girl children with value-based education. (Courtesy of Tisy Jose)

Under the ever-alert monitoring and guidance of the principal a hopeful modus operandi began to move forward toward a vibrant modus vivendi.

Given the alarming surge of suicide, it's time that we move from the cliché "Live and *let* live" to "Live and *help* live."

Living and merely letting others live is a passive attitude. Students must be taught how to live a happy life and help others to live happily. Life skills like communication, self-management of emotional highs and lows, time management,

critical thinking, healthy life styles, and problem-solving abilities are absolutely necessary for the optimal development of the individual.

In the tripartite venture of education, it's essential that the parents and society be made aware of the dangers of their high expectations for their children. Family being the first nursery of a child, it is the prime duty of the parents to teach their children the sacredness of life — the most precious gift of God — and that we have no right to destroy it at our will.

It is up to working parents to make time to be there with their adolescents and teens, to alleviate their academic stress and instill in them the truth that life is precious and that there is more to life than academic excellence.

We follow in the footsteps of the one who came that we may have life. Let's be grateful to God for his precious gift of life to us — living it to the full and also helping others to live their lives to the full.