

When A Suicide Occurs

A FAITH PERSPECTIVE

Decades ago it was believed that those who had committed suicide had committed a mortal sin and therefore their eternal state was unknown. Sadly, there was even a time when those who had committed suicide were not permitted to receive a Christian burial. It is important to know this history since it still pervades popular religion, parish culture, and family culture. When a person commits suicide this line of thinking can still be pervasive and we must be aware of its existence.

What does the Church really teach?

We look to 2280-2283 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* for an outline of the Church's official teaching on suicide where we find a much more positive and hopeful perspective. While we are all responsible for our own life, "it is God who remains the sovereign Master of life.....it is not ours to dispose of" (CCC 2280). While the Church recognizes the gift of life and that "suicide is contrary to love for the living God" (CCC 2281), it also recognizes that "grave psychological disturbances, anguish, or grave fear of hardship, suffering, or torture can diminish the responsibility of the one committing suicide" (CCC 2282). The Church goes on to give us a message of great hope, "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....." (CCC 2283).

Bishop Fulton Sheen once said that we never know the state of the soul in the moments between a person causing their death and the actual moment of death. We are never the judges of a person's soul, for judgment is God's alone. We must remember that God is a loving God who desires for all of creation to be with God for all eternity. We continue to pray for those who have taken their lives, as we do for all of the faithfully departed. For it is through God's mercy that we find our eternal rest.

Other Notes on Suicide

taken from an article entitled "The Unthinkable Has Happened" by Mary Angela Shaughnessy, SCN, with Karen M. Juliano, Norma Horan, & Molly Gosline as published in Momentum February/March 2007

- No adult should tell a young person “that those who take their lives are going to hell, that suicide is mortal sin, that God caused _____ to die, or that the death is God’s will
- Young people may want to know how the death occurred. “There is no point in trying to clean up the facts. Rumors feed on attempts to sugarcoat. Tell the truth in simple, age-appropriate terms”
- “Human nature is to look for a scapegoat”. Do not try and place blame in other places. Never agree with others who attempt to place blame somewhere. “Regardless of one’s feelings, one should never accept responsibility or volunteer that one is guilty.”
- Pray for the deceased and their family
- Intention does not matter. It is not necessary nor healthy to speculate about why someone did this
- Do not attempt to stifle age-appropriate discussion, *especially about feelings*.
- Ask questions such as: How did you feel when you heard what happened? How do you think the family feels right now? How would you feel? (these two questions will most likely be in the thoughts of the teens) How can you help others who are feeling sad? How can others help you?
- Adults should not ignore their own grief...they should process it in a peer environment
- Help teens to process their feelings in a safe and loving atmosphere

REMEMBER: You know your child the best! Recognize when there are changes that are unusual for them. Ask them questions appropriate to their age and emotional maturity. Many times their grief will depend on their previous experiences (or lack of) with death.