

The Catholic Doctor Is In: A Catholic View of Suicide

As a physician, I regularly see patients and peers who have committed or attempted suicide. It's becoming more and more common for people to turn to suicide as an escape. Tragically, it seems to have become an acceptable way of avoiding being a "burden on society."

Suicide is now the tenth leading cause of death in our country. It is most common in widowed or divorced older men and has become the third leading cause of death in young adults. About 35,000 people died by suicide last year. Every year, more people die by suicide than by homicide.

The Catholic Church condemns any form of suicide or assisted suicide; such an act is such an act is objectively evil, even though the person's responsibility for the act is often mitigated by any number of factors. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states that "Everyone is responsible for his life before God who has given it to him... We are stewards, not owners, of the life God has entrusted to us." Furthermore, the Catechism states that suicide contradicts love of self, love of neighbor, and love for God. In addition, if done to set an example, suicide can be scandalous.

However, there are a number of possible factors that diminish the responsibility of the person committing suicide. All mortal sins must meet three conditions: it must be serious, it must be committed with full knowledge of the gravity and sinful nature of the act, and it must be made with full consent of the will.

Therefore, the Catechism states that grave psychological disturbances, anguish, or intense fear of hardship, torture, or suffering can diminish the responsibility of the one committing suicide. We should never despair of the salvation of persons who have committed suicide. God can provide an opportunity for salutary repentance.

The bottom line is that we will never know here on earth what a person was thinking, feeling, or suffering when he took his life. We will never know what his last thoughts were. We will never know what passed between the person and God at the moment of death.

Do not forget that God is outside of time. It is never too late to pray! We can pray for those who are at risk of suicide, but we can also pray for the souls of those who have died by suicide. Those prayers can be applied to the person's life, deathbed, or time in purgatory—wherever the prayers could best be put to use. The Chaplet of Divine Mercy is a wonderful devotion for this, among many others. Asking for intercession by Saint Dymphna, the patron saint of mental and nervous disorders, is another idea.

We are surrounded every day by people who are contemplating suicide, and statistically, most of them are silently asking for help. Be mindful of family, friends, or patients who are persistently sad or withdrawn. Changes in personality, appetite, or sleep patterns can be important warning signs. Sudden changes in grades or productivity at work or suddenly giving away possessions, writing a will, or talking about death may also be warning signs. If you think someone is contemplating suicide, talk to them. Don't be afraid to ask questions, and to listen carefully to what you are hearing. Call 9-1-1 if the danger is imminent, and do not leave the person alone until help arrives.

If you are considering suicide, or you are with a person who is considering suicide but not in acute danger, call 1-800-SUICIDE. Or look for a local resource for initial assessment and counseling. A good online resource is:www.suicide.org.

"We beg you, Lord, to hear the prayers of St. Dymphna on our behalf. Grant all those for whom we pray patience in their sufferings and resignation to your divine will. Please fill them with hope, and grant them the relief and cure they so much desire. We ask this through Christ our Lord who suffered agony in the garden. Amen."

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