

## **Suicide – A Pastoral Reflection**

The death of someone close to us is, for very obvious reasons, a very difficult experience to deal with even if their death was expected. The death of someone who has taken their own life can have an even greater impact for all the same reasons but also because the bereaved are left with so many unanswered questions and, perhaps, feelings of anger and guilt over what has happened: anger because the act may seem selfish and inconsiderate given the unnecessary suffering it has caused, and guilt because of the anger and wondering whether something could have been done to stop the person doing what they did. In addition there is also, in people's minds at least, a certain stigma attached to the act of suicide which, for Catholics at least, results from the Church's attitude in the past toward someone who has taken their own life. I would emphasise "in the past" because things have changed and this is what I wanted to talk about in this article.

Once upon a time people thought the earth was flat and that voyagers who went too far toward the horizon would fall off the edge. Astronomers once believed that the sun revolved around the earth. The Titanic was considered unsinkable. The First World War was said to be the war to end all wars. Sometimes we are simply wrong about things, sometimes it's more a case of knowledge and discovery developing in ways earlier generations simply couldn't have imagined.

In the same way Church teaching changes and develops - primarily in response to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, but also because it is an institution that finds expression in and through the multitude of peoples and cultures that are the Church. Inevitably, therefore, certain aspects of Church teaching, or, at least, the ways in which it is understood and expressed, will necessarily be influenced by the understanding and development of the age in which it is taught. The Holy Spirit is never wrong in its guidance, but the human institution may, from time to time, not express its understanding in quite the best way, or a better way only becomes clear over time as ways of thinking and expression change.

So, for example, the Church has traditionally taught that baptism is essential for salvation, but then the question inevitably arose: what about babies who died before they had been baptised – babies who quite clearly were not responsible for their unbaptised state? And so the concept of "limbo" developed which seemed to satisfy the teaching of the day. It wasn't heaven (for which baptism was necessary), but at the same time it wasn't hell (a punishment that babies quite clearly had done nothing to deserve).

In a more enlightened era, post-Vatican II, the Church developed a different understanding: because a baby that dies without being baptised has clearly done

nothing that would be deserving of hell, then why would we believe that it wouldn't be in heaven? The concept of "limbo" is therefore no longer taught and our modern catechism simply says: "the Church can only entrust them to the mercy of God." Surely we have no trouble in believing that God receives back into heaven – then as now - the souls of those who died when they were still too young to choose God for themselves. Nonetheless it is amazing, thirty or forty years later, just how many people still seem to be unaware that the Church's thinking and teaching on the subject has changed.

It's the same with the Sacrament of the Sick, a rite that was authorised for use as long ago as 1972. It offers, in its fullest form, confession, reception of holy communion and anointing for "those Christians whose health is seriously impaired by sickness<sup>1</sup> or old age"<sup>2</sup> and for those approaching death. As the rite states, sacraments are celebrated for the living and therefore priests are no longer permitted to anoint someone after they have died<sup>3</sup>. Consequently the rite of anointing within the sacrament should no longer be associated with death and yet, nearly forty years since the Sacrament of the Sick was introduced, people still talk about "the last rites", and as long as that term continues to be used it makes it very difficult for a priest to suggest the sacrament to someone if they immediately think it must mean they are dying when, in fact, they may not be.

And so back to the subject of suicide which, as tragic as it is for the bereaved, is made unnecessarily worse because, like "limbo" and "the last rites", people aren't always aware that the Church now takes a more pastorally sensitive approach than was historically the case.

What hasn't changed is the Church's basic teaching that the taking of life<sup>4</sup>, including one's own, is intrinsically morally wrong. Commenting on the fifth commandment the catechism states: *Human life is sacred because from its beginning it involves the creative action of God... God alone is the Lord of life from its beginning until its end: no one can under any circumstances claim for himself the right directly to destroy an innocent human being. We are stewards, not owners, of the life God has entrusted to us. It is not ours to dispose of.*<sup>5</sup>

At a time before psychology was even heard of, if someone took their own life it was considered a straightforward act against the fifth commandment, a fundamental morally wrong act that was mortally sinful and, therefore, the Church's teaching was that a person dying in such a state of mortal sin went to hell - that's how things were understood at the time and so that's what was taught. And because it was considered such a moral evil, someone who took

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<sup>1</sup> (including people going into hospital for surgery)

<sup>2</sup> *Pastoral Care of the Sick*, para 97

<sup>3</sup> " " para's 223 & 224

<sup>4</sup> (with the exception of accidental death and legitimate defence)

<sup>5</sup> " " " para's 2258 & 2280

their own life was not allowed a funeral Mass nor could they be buried in consecrated ground. However we are now living in far more enlightened times (in some respects at least!) - an enlightenment that resulted from due regard being given to the on-going findings of psychology and psychiatry.

The catechism says: *Suicide contradicts the natural inclination of the human being to preserve and perpetuate his life. It is gravely contrary to the just love of self.*<sup>6</sup> If, therefore, someone takes their own life, it would suggest that their “natural inclination” is not at work – a point that was missed prior to the knowledge gleaned from psychiatric study. A person can only be guilty of mortal sin if they are fully aware of the seriousness of what they are about to do and yet freely decide to go ahead and do it anyway. If someone were under such a burden of concern or anxiety that they were no longer thinking logically, they could therefore not be guilty of committing a mortal sin in taking their own life. The catechism goes on to say exactly the same thing: *Grave psychological disturbances, anguish or grave fear of hardship, suffering or torture can diminish the responsibility of the one committing suicide.*<sup>7</sup>

It would, I think, be an extremely rare occurrence for someone to quite deliberately and logically decide to end their life and then do it. Generally, if circumstances are leading them to contemplate such an action and with that sort of clarity, there will instead be a “cry for help” – something, whether in words or actions, designed to alert others to how they feel. They don’t really want to end their life, they just want others to know that they *feel like* ending it. Hopefully family, friends or work colleagues will be alert to such a cry. Sometimes however, and very sadly, the cry goes unnoticed and the attempt is successful even though it wasn’t intended to be.

More typically a person’s decision to end their life isn’t that logical. Levels of extreme anguish or fear can build up to a point where they become completely unmanageable and result in psychological disturbance and imbalance. The person isn’t thinking clearly or logically; they are lacking judgment; things are out of perspective; life and the threat it appears to hold becomes something they can no longer deal with; ending their life seems to them to be the only way to also end the perceived insurmountable problem. Another cause can be what one source calls the “bottomless despair” of clinical depression, the extreme feelings of dejection and hopelessness of someone who feels they are completely worthless and life isn’t worth living. Again, the person isn’t thinking logically or clearly, reality is distorted, things are out of perspective and out of control.

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<sup>6</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para 2281  
<sup>7</sup> “ “ “ para 2282

If a person then attempts suicide, especially successfully, family and friends will inevitably experience feelings of guilt. How could this happen? Why didn't we see the problem?

Even given what we have said about how unbalanced a person's mind is who has decided to end their life, they can be remarkably focussed when it comes to actually carrying it out and very good at hiding their intentions and making everything appear normal. If there are signs, they may very subtle and easily missed even by those closest to them. It's sometimes the throwaway remark or the out-of-character mood or behaviour that should alert us, but we understandably resist such thoughts and give people the benefit of the doubt. Trying to come to terms with a suicide can become a very difficult mix of what we feel we may have failed to do for them, and the reality of (and anger caused by) what they have done to us (and perhaps feeling guilty for feeling that way).

In the face of all of this, there is at least some consolation to be gained by the more enlightened and compassionate pastoral approach that the Church now takes toward the tragedy of suicide: *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 the opportunity for salutary repentance. The Church prays for (them)*<sup>8</sup>. And they can now have a funeral service and a cemetery burial the same as anyone else, in fact the *Order of Christian Funerals* even contains a choice of prayers specifically for such an occasion. All in all, a complete about-turn from the Church's earlier position.

I rather suspect that while God was waiting for us to discover psychology and so better understand the mental turmoil that can contribute to a person taking their own life, he was treating such people with the love and compassion and understanding that the Church has now come to accept and teach. Hopefully this might offer some comfort and consolation to those who may have had family members who committed suicide back in those less enlightened years.

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Fr Neil McNicholas

**Footnote:** All of this is very different to the situation of someone seeking assisted suicide in a clinic established for that purpose. They have quite deliberately made a decision to end their life - a decision that is planned and premeditated and therefore morally unacceptable, against the fifth commandment, and (for a Catholic) against the moral teaching of the Church. The person who assists them is equally morally guilty.

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<sup>8</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para 2283