

## **The Sorrows of Suicide**

Then you frighten me with dreams  
and terrify me with visions,  
So that I should prefer strangulation  
and death rather than my existence.

Job 7:14-15

*Deacon Christoph Sandoval*

**Suicide** is the act of intentionally causing one's own death. An American dies by Suicide every 12.95 minutes. Veterans comprise 22.2 per cent of Suicides nationwide. 1.5 Million years of life are lost annually to Suicide. Americans attempt Suicide an estimated 1 million times a year. In 2012, firearms were the most common method of death by suicide, accounting for 50.9% of all suicide deaths, followed by suffocation (including hangings) at 24.8% and poisoning at 16.7% aided and abetted by the Hemlock Society the so-called right to die organization. But perhaps the most startling statistic is that for every suicide, it is estimated that an average of six people are intimately affected and may continue to grieve for their dearly departed for decades. Even more than the mourners of other types of sudden death, these “survivors of suicide” tend to experience an intense bereavement complicated by severe feelings of guilt and shame. As a survivor once said “The person who completes suicide, dies once. Those left behind die a thousand deaths, trying to relive those terrible moments and understand ... Why?”

The Catholic Church has a morally clear and pastorally sensitive teaching on suicide. The Church teaches that suicide is a sin against love of God, love of oneself and love of neighbor. On the other hand, the Church also teaches that an individual’s moral culpability for the act of suicide can be diminished by mental illness, as described in the Catechism: “Grave psychological disturbances, anguish or grave fear of hardship, suffering or torture can diminish the responsibility of the one committing suicide.” Knowing that 90% of those who die by suicide had a diagnosable psychiatric disorder at the time of their death offers consolation to surviving families, friends and faith communities.

The Catechism goes on to say: “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 persons who have taken their own lives.”

Why does someone commit suicide? Although some victims leave notes, which endeavor to explain their suicide, by and large a number of factors pave the way to such a drastic decision. Most people who commit suicide are not choosing death itself. Often they are attempting to alleviate unrelenting suffering caused by physical, psychological or spiritual human suffering. They may have tried other means of ending their torment with no success, leaving them with a sense of despair in which suicide becomes a real option to end their anguish. Survivors of those who have committed suicide are often beleaguered with unanswered questions about why a loved one may have taken his/her own life. Often feelings of guilt resulting from unresolved arguments, or some other failure in the relationship with the deceased, are understandable, they are generally not an accurate explanation of the decision to commit suicide, and can leave a survivor feeling unnecessarily guilty about something that was, in fact, beyond their control.

Émile Durkheim, one of the fathers of sociology, in his classic text, *Suicide* (1897) pointed to three hypotheses in the Catholic Church that helps to stem the tide of suicidal ideation. Catholics more often rely upon the congregation linked by the Eucharist so that in times of trouble they can rely on Jesus as our cornerstone of community. Our Catholic Faith furnishes a solution to the enigma of suffering, inasmuch as it shows man living in a land of exile and suffering as a means of acquiring the glory and happiness of a future eternal life in Heaven. Catholic teachings on suicide are rigorous yet full of redemptive grace which become internalized among practicing and committed Catholics. A third hypothesis has to do with the Sacrament of Reconciliation in the act of regularly confessing our sins to a Catholic priest in persona Christi (“in the person of Christ”). Since suicide is the only sin that could never be confessed to a priest, Catholic citizens who find confession important in achieving Heaven and avoiding eternal separation from God lessens the inclination to commit suicide. In essence Catholic Christians find relief of relentless suffering in the practice of a sincere confession. While

the experience of mercy, understanding and consolation in the Sacrament reduces the causes, which are calculated to impel a human person to the extreme act of self-destruction still many do commit Suicide. It is important to recall Father Ron Rolheiser's insight. "If God is perfect love, compassion and understanding, if God is infinite mercy and can, as our Christian faith teaches us, descend into hell itself, then it is an affront to God's nature and an affront to our own faith to believe that such a God would, for all eternity, cut someone off from eternal life because that person was so fragile, so wounded, so bruised, so hypersensitive, or perhaps simply so biochemically imbalanced that, in a moment of depression or panic, that person took his or her own life. Deep down, all of us know that. We need to say it out loud."

### **Warning Signs of Suicide**

These signs may mean someone is at risk for suicide. Risk is greater if a behavior is new or has increased and if it seems related to a painful event, loss or change.

- Talking about wanting to die or to kill oneself.
- Looking for a way to kill oneself, such as searching online or buying a gun.
- Talking about feeling hopeless or having no reason to live.
- Talking about feeling trapped or in unbearable pain.
- Talking about being a burden to others.
- Increasing the use of alcohol or drugs.
- Acting anxious or agitated; behaving recklessly.
- Sleeping too little or too much.
- Withdrawn or feeling isolated.
- Showing rage or talking about seeking revenge.
- Displaying extreme mood swings.
- Preoccupation with death.
- Suddenly happier, calmer.
- Loss of interest in things one cares about.
- Visiting or calling people to say goodbye.
- Making arrangements; setting one's affairs in order.
- Giving things away, such as prized possessions.

### **Suicide Resources**

- **Prevention:** San Francisco Suicide Prevention 24-HOUR CRISIS LINE 415 / 781-0500 or 800 / 273-8255
- Toll Free Nationwide Crisis Line 1-800-273-TALK
- **Grief Support:** Sr. Elaine, RSM at the Cathedral of Saint Mary of the Assumption  
415-567-2020 Ext. 218 Deacon Christoph Sandoval, Facilitator
- **2015 International Survivors of Suicide Loss Day in San Francisco**  
<http://www.survivorday.org/event/san-francisco-ca/> or call 415-476-7198
- **The Journey: A Story of Healing and Hope Video**  
<http://www.survivorday.org/survivor-day-documentaries/>