

The Church and Suicide

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Q: What does the Catholic Church teach about suicide? Do people who kill themselves automatically go to Hell?

A: Your question is a very important one. Many people in our day are deeply affected by this question, both directly and indirectly. Many readers know someone who has committed suicide, and all of us are living in a country that continues to consider allowing physician-assisted suicide as part of “health care”.

Catholics must take an absolute stand against every form of suicide. Suicide is “contrary to the love of God”. It is truly evil. Now, please understand me here. In saying that suicide is evil, I am not saying that a person is evil. Catholics believe that each human person is intrinsically good. But we can choose to do evil actions. There are some actions which are evil in and of themselves, regardless of motivation or circumstance. Of these, suicide is one.

If a person freely chose to kill themselves, fully knowing that they were saying “no” to God, and they died unrepentant, all signs point to eternal separation from God. But here’s the deal: we don’t know a lot of that information. I don’t know if they were free (they may have suffered from “grave psychological disturbances, anguish, or grave fear of hardship, suffering, or torture”...these can lessen their responsibility (cf. CCC 2282). I also don’t know their degree of knowledge; did they know that they were not simply “escaping pain”, but were in fact choosing something contrary to God’s love? And lastly, none of us have any way of knowing if they repented before death. There is an ancient saying in the Church, “We don’t know what happened between the bridge and the water”. This is indicating that you and I have no clue if the person we love regretted their decision and turned back to God at the last minute. There are stories of many people who survived attempted suicides, who found themselves praying that God didn’t let them die even after they jumped, or swallowed the pills, or whatever.

There is so much we don’t know. And so the Church teaches us to have hope. The Church teaches us to pray for these dearly beloved brothers and sisters.

As the Catechism indicates, things like serious mental illness and depression that can mitigate a person’s guilt in this action. We need to treat these illnesses very seriously and care for the individual. With this kind of care, I have no doubt that many lives could be saved. At the same time, the suicide rate among teens in America has increased 5,000% in the last fifty years. Chances are good that this is not due to a 5,000% increase in mental illness (although it may be a contributing factor). It seems that there is more going on here.

The way we (our modern culture) think also contributes to this problem. Someone might say, “It’s my life, and I can do what I want with it”. No it isn’t and no you may not. As Christians, we believe that we are the stewards, not the masters, of our lives. They are, as it were, “on loan” from God. We are not our own. No one is his or her own...in a sense, we belong to each other...as well as to God. In addition, our modern culture does not know what life “means”. If we don’t know what life means, then suffering will have absolutely no meaning. But as Christians, we believe that life and suffering both have meaning. Even if a person is in a persistent vegetative state, their life has meaning. Because of Christ, even suffering has taken on an entirely new dimension; it can be redemptive.

When youth, beauty, and pleasure are exalted (just look at the magazines at the grocery store; even the magazines about “growing older” feature people who look like they are in their thirties...they just have grey hair), then the lack of youth or beauty or pleasure is an evil. It is not. Old age is a blessing. Beauty is fleeting and is no way to measure a person’s worth. And the pursuit of pleasure is a dead end. These philosophies lead to despair, Christ leads to hope.

Many people I talk with who have loved someone who committed suicide struggle simultaneously with feelings of grief and anger. They are sad at the loss and at the pain that they saw their loved one go through, they can also be mad at the person who killed themselves. That's fine. It is okay to be mad at them...or to be mad at the situation. We don't have to be afraid to acknowledge that, while the person may have been hurting, they really hurt everyone else when they killed themselves. It was possibly an act of selfishness on their part, and now we have to stand around and try to pick up the pieces of our shattered lives.

Now, of course, there is a difference between "being mad at" and "hating" or "condemning". We may be mad, but we are still called to love.

And this is critical. To "love" means to "will the good of the other". When we love the person who has committed suicide, we will their good. This means that we pray for them. The Church teaches us to pray for those who have died. Why? Because the Church believes that no matter what, there is always hope.