

For Further Information Contact:

Pope John Paul II Society of Evangelists

14818 Ranchero Road
Hesperia, California, USA
Telephone: 760-220-6818
FAX: 760-948-7620
E-mail: pjpiisoe@earthlink.net
www.pjpiisoe.org

Pamphlet 098

Repercussions of Suicide

Fr. William P. Saunders, Ph.d

The son of my neighbor recently committed suicide. He wasn't Catholic, but I wondered if the Church still taught that suicide is a mortal sin and if a person who commits suicide could have a funeral Mass.



Before addressing the act of suicide, we must first remember that God is the giver of all life. Each of us has been made in God's image and likeness (Gen 1:27) with both a body and a soul. Therefore, life is sacred from the moment of conception until natural death, and no one can justify the intentional taking of an innocent human life.

For Christians, this teaching takes on even greater depth because our Lord entered this world and accepted our own human condition. Our Lord knew the joy and pain, success and failure, pleasure and suffering, happiness and sorrow that come in this life; yet, He also showed us how to live this life in the love of God and trusting in His will. Moreover, Jesus suffered, died, and rose to

free us from sin and give us the promise of everlasting life. Through our baptism, we share a new life in the Lord. St. Paul reminds us, "You have been purchased, and at a price. So glorify God in your body" (I Cor 6:20).

Therefore, we must be mindful that the preservation of our life — body and soul — is not something discretionary but obligatory. We must preserve and nourish both our physical and spiritual life. The Catechism asserts, "Everyone is responsible for his life before God who has given it to him. It is God who remains the sovereign Master of life. We are obliged to accept life gratefully and preserve it for His honor and the salvation of our souls. We are stewards, not owners, of the life God has entrusted to us. It is not ours to dispose of" (no. 2280).

With this foundation in mind, we can see why suicide has traditionally be considered a gravely wrong moral action, i.e. a mortal sin. Our Holy Father affirmed this position in his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (no. 66). (Please note that suicide is distinguished from the sacrifice of one's life for God or another, as in the cases of martyrdom, or of offering one's life or risking it to save another person.)

The intentional taking of one's own life is wrong for several reasons: First, in the most basic sense, each human being naturally seeks to his preserve life. To take one's own life defies the natural instinct to live. Second, suicide violates a genuine love for oneself and one's neighbor — family,

friends, neighbors and even acquaintances. Other people need us and depend upon us in ways we may not even know. When I as a priest have had to comfort the family of a suicide victim, I hope that the person somehow realizes how much he really was loved and needed. I also feel sad that this poor troubled person faced something so seemingly unbearable, insurmountable, or agonizing that he chose to withdraw from the love of God and others, and kill himself. Finally, suicide defies the love we owe God. Sure, we all face the tough times, hardships, and sufferings. However, we are called to place ourselves in the hands of God who will never abandon us, but see us safely through this life. The words of the "Our Father" — "thy will be done" — must be real for us. To commit suicide is to reject His "lordship" in our life.

Therefore, objectively, suicide is a mortal sin. (Moreover, to help someone commit suicide is also a mortal sin.) Here though we must remember that for a sin to be mortal and cost someone salvation, the objective action must be grave or serious matter (which in this case the taking of one's own life is); the person must have an informed intellect (know that this is wrong); and the person must give full consent of the will (intend to commit this action). In the case of suicide, a person may not have given full consent of the will. Fear, force, ignorance, habit, passion and psychological problems can impede the exercise of the will so that a person may not be fully responsible or even responsible at all for an action. Here again the Catechism states, "Grave psychological

disturbances, anguish, or grave fear of hardship, suffering, or torture can diminish the responsibility of the one committing suicide" (no. 2282). In the circumstances surrounding suicide, oftentimes a person has battled diagnosed clinical depression for many years; in such cases one would wonder whether the person was acting with the full consent of the will. This qualification does not make suicide a right action in any circumstance; however, it does make us realize that the person may not be totally culpable for the action because of various circumstances or personal conditions.

Only God can read the depths of our soul. Only He knows how much we love Him and how responsible we are for our actions. We leave the judgment then to Him alone. The Catechism offers words 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 the opportunity for salutary repentance. The Church prays for persons who have taken their own lives" (no. 2283). Therefore, we do offer the Mass for the repose of the soul of a suicide victim, invoking God's tender love and mercy for him, and His healing grace for the grieving loved ones.

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