

Ask Fr James

What is the Catholic Church's view on Suicide?

The Catholic Church's doctrine has always been sympathetic of those with suicide ideation because it knows that some suicidal behaviours and ideations are as a result of biopsychosocial causes and at that same time several risk factors for suicidal behaviours could be as a result of low socio-economic status, experienced child abuse and mental disorders, etc. However, the Catholic Church urges people with suicidal thoughts and those considering physician-assisted suicide (PAS) and euthanasia to know that God cares about suffering and problems and just as prayer helps with our hearts' desires, so also prayers can help with the alleviation of suffering.

The church discourages Christians from taking the suicide option by justifying it as when a person has no way out, then it is okay to end it believing that having accepted Jesus as one's Lord and saviour, God will understand and not condemn one for this. It is the Catholic teaching, based on scriptures, that "Death is under God's control and suicide or suicide ideation is a usurpation of God's authority." Catholics believe in the Sanctity of life; which is the view that life is a gift from God and God alone decides when life begins and ends. You didn't bring yourself into life, God brought you into life. And ending your life is going against the will of God.

The church recognizes that terminal illness, excruciating pain, stress, depression and hopelessness are increasingly becoming widespread reasons why people exhibit suicidal behaviours, for this reason, the church supports clinical practice for suicide prevention and recommends palliative care for those contemplating physician assisted suicide. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church: "Palliative care is a special form of disinterested charity and as such it should be encouraged (CCC #2278-79).

The church advises that suicide is not the best choice to reduce the burden of the sick person or his/her caregivers or of their excruciating life condition. Through palliative care, God calls us to love this person and care for them until natural death. It is also compassionate to let nature take its course and also not take extraordinary means to stay alive. The Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, says; "God alone is the Lord of life from its beginning until its end: no one can under any circumstance claim for himself the right directly to destroy an innocent human being" (*Donum Vitae*, 1987: 9). We are to remember that in his agony in the Garden, Jesus struggles with his own human suffering, his sorrow and anticipation of pain and loss (Luke 22:44). He came to terms with this suffering, accepting it in love for God and all human beings.

Catholics "believe in the hereafter and in the Last Judgment." Good Friday leads to Easter. Everyone would be questioned about their God-given life at the gate in the hereafter. The church believes that through suicide, a person is simply changing the location of their suffering and by assisting someone to kill themselves is assisting them in murder. Ordinarily, in the past, the Church would deny anyone who committed suicide church funeral and burial in consecrated ground. But today, the Catholic canon law in this respect is flexible, leaving room for the judgment of the local bishop. The reason being that, the Catholic Church is moved by mercy and compassion as Christ did.

However, the Catholic Church recommends "church attendance and good prayer life for all people and for those with suicide ideation, asking that we all acknowledge what Jesus says; "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" [John 14:6]). The Liturgies for funeral especially the St. Basil and St. John Chrysostom liturgy, we pray that death may be "painless, blameless, peaceful" and we pray for "a good defense before the Dread Judgment Seat of Christ." Thus, the cost of committing suicide and thereby incurring an afterlife condemnation is not worth the double suffering here and in the hereafter. If anyone was contemplating suicide, they are to remember that there are people out there that are there to help us cope with the situation and that Religion and spirituality help reduce the risk of suicide. They can also go seek counseling and prayers from the priest.

You may email/send your faith questions to Fr. James and he will answer them in our Sunday Bulletins.