

Responding to Suicide

The Rt. Rev. Patrick S. Fodor

“Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are. ... Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, Whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.” (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 6:19-20)

There has been a dramatic increase in suicide in recent years. (See, e.g., <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db471.pdf> and <https://www.forbes.com/sites/anafaguy/2023/08/10/suicide-rate-reaches-all-time-high-in-2022-cdc-data-suggests/?sh=6c5c7f0a58b8>).

There are many questions surrounding the Church’s position against suicide as a grave (“mortal” 1 Jn. 5:16) sin. Related topics include “Physician-assisted suicide” and “Euthanasia,” both of which require treatment on their own. To begin, however, we should define what suicide is and set out a major distinction between objective and subjective aspects. Suicide is to purposefully take one’s own life out of misdirected self-love. The term “suicide” was coined in 1651, and literally means “self” (*sui*) “to kill” (*cide*, the same root word, for example, used in “homicide”).

Objectively speaking, the act of self-murder is gravely wrong, of such a nature that it automatically, like every act of murder, severs right relationship with God. It is for this reason that historically those who committed suicide have, by canon law, been denied Christian burial, since to take one’s own life presumably means that one is placing oneself outside of the Christian Church by mortal sin and is not able to repent afterwards. To give Christian burial also would then give the false message that the Church condones suicide and does not see it as a grave sin. Suicide is a sin against God as the Creator and Sustainer of life. It rejects God’s sovereignty and usurps His prerogative in regard to life and death (cf. Job 12:10, as well as 1 Cor. texts above). Speaking to this, for example, St. Augustine writes:

In the canonical sacred books there can nowhere be found any injunction or permission to commit suicide either to ensure immortality or to avoid or escape any evil. God’s command ‘Thou shalt not murder,’ is to be taken as forbidding self-destruction, especially as it does not add ‘thy neighbor’, as it does when it forbids false witness, ‘Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor’ (*City of God*, Book I, chapter 20).

St. Thomas Aquinas explains the moral prohibition against suicide on three grounds. (1) Suicide is contrary to natural self-love, the aim of which is to preserve us. (2) Suicide injures the community of which an individual is a part. (3) Suicide violates our duty to God because God has given us life as a gift and in taking our lives we violate His right to determine the duration of our earthly existence (*Summa Theologica* 1271, part II, Q64, A5). It is an objective, unchanging and unchangeable standard of Christian morality to treat suicide as a serious objective moral wrong.

There are, however, **subjective** aspects we must observe. The objective guilt of the act may not necessarily mean that there is subjective moral guilt, or it may mean that the degree of guilt is lessened. It may be possible, at least with some forms of suicide, that the act of self-murder may have allowed for a time of repentance. For example, if you take poison, but then repent of doing so before death and pray for God’s forgiveness, that makes an essential difference. In addition, various factors which take away, partially or entirely, the actual freedom to make moral choices matter. The less you are able to control your own decisions and the less you are fully aware of the meaning and implication of your actions, the less your subjective guilt when those acts are wrong. Someone who, in full understanding of what he is doing, in full possession of his mental faculties and without any illusions regarding the world around him, murders himself to escape suffering bears full subjective guilt. Those who are suffering from delusions or loss of control from chemical or neurological illness and so on may not. So there is a moral difference between clear-minded, freely chosen suicide and suicide due to psychological or physiological factors such as a chemical imbalance, severe clinical depression, or some other altered mental state. The Church’s response, and our response as Christians to those who have lost family members or friends to suicide, must be tempered by both an awareness of such possible factors and a reliance on the wisdom and grace of God.

Finally, we should observe that the Christian Church has *never* dogmatically made any pronouncements consigning any particular person to hell. The Church declares saints but otherwise consigns all human persons, including those outside the Church, to God’s mercy and goodness, knowing that God alone knows all there is to know and God alone will do what is fully good and right. We must avoid either sins of presumption or despair as we commend ourselves, all our lives, and all we love, to God’s mercy and love.

Suggested Reading:

Association of Catholic Mental Health Ministers. *When a Loved One Dies by Suicide*. Ave Maria Press, 2020.