

My Annual Reflection on Suicide

2010-08-08

Every year I write a column on suicide. It's not my favorite thing to do, but I do it because there is too little in the public forum, secular or religious, on this painful issue. Suicide remains one of the great unmentionables and people who lose loved ones to suicide search mostly in vain for anything that might bring understanding and consolation.

This year, more than in previous years, I am struggling to write this piece because a number of people have written lately suggesting that my writings make light of the issue, that I am offering a false and dangerous consolation, and, worse still, that my writing (by softening the taboo that sees suicide as final despair) helps contribute to the number of suicides. By softening this taboo, I have been warned, you give people permission to kill themselves. God forgives, so why not? As well, Roman Catholics frequently quote the Catechism of the Catholic Church in their defense of their criticism.

All of that notwithstanding, the issue still needs to be addressed: The hard fact is that, in the United States alone, there are 3-4 suicides each hour, more than 90 per day, over 33,000 per year, and each of those deaths deeply touches many people. Ultimately everyone is affected. Nobody goes through life without his or her life having been touched, scarred and irrevocably changed, by someone else's suicide. Amidst all of this, mostly there is quiet stoicism. Let's not talk about it. But underneath the stoicism lies a bitter ambivalence, photographs get taken down, memories get erased, and we grapple with unresolved guilt, shame, fear for their salvation, and, not least, a certain dis-ease about life itself. If this can happen, what really can be trusted?

What needs to be said about suicide, beyond what I have tried to say clearly in my earlier writings?

First, that the fear my critics express needs to be taken seriously: Suicide is a terrible thing. The radical taboo that society and the churches have placed around it, like the taboo surrounding incest, is there for a good reason. This is a terrible act from which there is no coming back. It destroys, and permanently, more than just the life of the person who does this act. We may never make light of suicide. That is why it has always been encased in this terrible taboo.

But that taboo is meant as a warning before the fact. Something also needs to be said after the fact. When someone dies by his own hand, those left behind literally gasp for human and theological oxygen. Something needs to be said to those left behind.

My writings on suicide are intended to address those left behind, not to serve as a counseling tool for someone who is clinically depressed. Moreover, I submit, that nothing I have said about suicide goes against what is taught in the Catechism of the Catholic

Church. What is taught there in fact radiates deep compassion and understanding: It highlights the gravity of the issue, states clearly that this is an act that goes against every intentionality that God has for human life, goes on to state that responsibility for the act can be radically diminished by someone's psychological state, and then invites us to trust in God's understanding and compassion. Moreover, in its pastoral practice, with virtually no exceptions, the church mirrors what I have written.

I remember when this was not always the case. When I was an adolescent, one of our neighbors took his own life. At the time, there was still a painful question around suicide: Should this man be given the full rites of the church and be buried in a church cemetery? Our priest, Father Michael Schatz, a quiet, unassuming man, an Oblate of Mary Immaculate, quickly removed all doubt and did what Jesus would have done: He extended to this wounded man and his grieving family the full compassion of God, the church, and the community. I am a priest today as much because of this as for any other reason. His response helped me understand God's heart and what human and ecclesial compassion should be.

In the end it boils down to a question of God: 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 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.

We are in safe hands, hands far gentler than our own. God can be trusted, and nowhere is this truer or more poignant than in the question of suicide.



RON ROLHEISER, OMI Speaker, Columnist, Author

Ronald Rolheiser, a Roman Catholic priest and member of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, is president of the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio, Texas.

He is a community-builder, lecturer and writer. His books are popular throughout the English-speaking world and his weekly column is carried by more than seventy newspapers worldwide.

info@ronrolheiser.com