

How *You* Can Help Someone Who Has Committed Suicide

There's always a sense of shock when someone close to us dies. The deeper our love, the more overwhelming our sorrow.

That's especially so when that death was sudden and unexpected.

Most of us experience that type of loss at some point in our lives but it seems, in recent years, more and more are facing the shock, grief, confusion and searing sense of guilt when that someone, when that loved one, takes his or her own life.

As Catholics we may ask ourselves—or be too afraid to ask ourselves:

Where are they now? Did they commit such a grievous sin that they've begun an eternity outside the presence of God?

And we may pray:

Oh, Dear Lord, how I wish I had done more to help them when they were alive. Is there anything, *anything*, I can do to help them now?

There was a time, not so long ago in the long history of the Church, when it was commonly accepted that those who committed suicide may well have been responsible for committing a mortal sin with no time to repent.

There was a time, not so long ago in the long history of medical and scientific advancement, that mental illness—including depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia and more—was vastly misunderstood.

And so many people suffered!

They were men, women and teens who didn't understand, were never told by those from whom they sought help, that like an appendicitis or tuberculosis, their mental condition was a *medical* condition. Not their fault. Sometimes treatable but not curable.

The pain, unimaginable to those of us who have never experienced it, didn't stop. Or all too frequently returned. Over time they were worn down. Overwhelmed. Without hope. Perhaps some thought and came to believe "I'm already in hell. What's the difference?"

We don't know what was going on in the mind of someone, including our loved one, who has taken his or her own life.

And we don't know, we'll never know, the mind of God. The God of love. The God of mercy.

When talking about suicide, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches this:

Grave psychological disturbances, anguish, or grave fear of hardship, suffering, or torture can diminish the responsibility of the one committing suicide.

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 [beneficial] repentance. The Church prays for persons who have taken their own lives. (2282-83)

Those two paragraphs are worth repeating. And remembering.

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And you can pray for a loved one who has committed suicide. For those you learn about in the news. For those whose death you’ve never heard of.

You can pray for all the souls—and for particular souls—who have died under any circumstance and because of any causes, and are now preparing to enter heaven.

You can and you should. Our abilities and opportunities to assist the suffering souls in purgatory are a God-given gift. A blessing, a grace, God invites us to use it again and again.

It well may be we could do little to help a loved one who suffered on earth but we can, *you* can, now play a key role in helping that soul more swiftly enter the complete and eternal joy of heaven.

How?

God, being God, makes it easy for us.

Again to the *Catechism*:

All who die in God’s grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven. The Church gives the name Purgatory to this final purification of the elect....

From the beginning the Church has honored the memory of the dead and offered prayers in suffrage for them, above all the Eucharistic sacrifice, so that, thus purified, they may attain the beatific vision of God. The Church also commends almsgiving, indulgences, and works of penance undertaken on behalf of the dead. (1030-32)

One of the best ways to help a particular soul in purgatory reach heaven is having Masses offered, especially Gregorian Masses. Those are a series of 30 Masses celebrated on 30 consecutive days for the repose of the soul of a departed person.

The name comes from Pope St. Gregory the Great, who was the first to popularize this practice. The *Dialogues of St. Gregory* tell of the soul of a departed monk who appeared and said that he had been delivered from purgatory upon the completion of 30 Masses.

The Sacred Congregation of Indulgences declared this tradition of more than 1,300 years “a pious and reasonable belief of the faithful on the authority of the Roman Curia.”

It’s important to note the Church *does not guarantee* that souls are released from purgatory after 30 Masses, but this practice focuses on the power and efficacy of the Mass.

(For more information visit the Pious Union of St. Joseph at www.pusj.org or call 517-522-8017.)

The Mass, the Rosary, the Stations of the Cross, Eucharistic Adoration, the Chaplet of Divine Mercy, and on and on. Our own prayers, coming directly from our hearts. Fasting. Making financial donations to help those in need. So many ways, so many opportunities.

Such power at our fingertips. Such comfort for the holy souls in purgatory and for those of us who grieve on earth, those desperately wanting to do *something*.