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Elayna Walloch

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The Catholic Church's Teachings on Suicide

Writing Process

I did as much research as I could before I ever began to write. Scholarly sources around my topic were more difficult to find than I anticipated as the Catholic Church's teachings about suicide have been changing in recent years. Being such a controversial and changing topic, I wanted to give as much respect and justice to the victims and their loved ones. I took about a week to write the preliminary paper, and another week to edit.

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Elayna Walloch

In the past, the bodies of those who had committed suicide were paraded through towns, disfigured, and set out for others to mock. While the Catholic Church refused proper Christian funerals, the bodies could also not be buried in town cemeteries and the families were often shunned. Today, the Church continues to view suicide “as a destructive force that wreaks havoc and calamity” in communities and across the globe (Potter). Prior to 1965, all Catholics were taught that suicide was a mortal sin, “never justifiable,” and resulted in eternal damnation (Hsu and Harris). More recently however, since Pope John Paul II, the Church has become more nuanced in their teachings surrounding suicide and more aware of outside factors in the decision to do so (Hsu and Harris). Although the Catholic Church previously condemned suicide as the “unforgivable sin,” their practices and teachings have become more merciful in dealing with suicide due to the exploration of mental illness and belief that what happens after death is beyond human knowledge and judgement.

A large reason why Catholics reject suicide is because of the belief that all people are made in the image of God and are required to “promote a human culture” (Potter). As all people are made in the image of God, wanting to commit suicide means wanting to destroy the likeness of God. The Catholic Catechism defends the position by saying that wanting to commit suicide “offends the love of neighbor” and is “contrary to love for the living God” (*Catechism* 2281). All people, due to being made in the image of God, are called to have a “just love of self,” and, by refusing to love oneself, one is also refusing to love God and everyone else made in the image of Him (2281). In addition, by being made in His likeness, all persons are obligated to live a life that “reflects the goodness of creation” (Potter). Committing suicide would be casting off that vital part of life and not performing the duties delegated to man by God. All people have an innate desire to “preserve and perpetuate his life” because they were made in the image

of God, and, by committing suicide, are renouncing this likeness (*Catechism* 2281).

The Catholic Church also condemns suicide because of the fifth commandment which states that, “You shall not kill” (2257). Although suicide does not include the killing of someone else, the Catholic Church still recognizes it as “self-murder” due to it being the “deliberate murder of an innocent person” (Hsu and Harris; *Catechism* 2261). Christians believe that every human life has inherent value due to their relationship with God, and no one has the right to take a life except for God Himself. For someone to take the life of another human being is an “assault upon God himself” because of the theft of what is rightfully His duty (qtd. in Potter). The ending of a human life removes the chance for repentance or development of a relationship with God. One cannot repent after death, so by ending the life, the possibility of doing so is terminated. This deadline for forgiveness is extended to those who take their own lives as Saint Augustine explains, “those who die by their own hand have no better life after death” (qtd. in Potter). According to the teachings of the Catholic Church, any spilling of human blood, even one’s own, is strictly prohibited because it is not within the domain of humanity to decide when someone’s time on Earth should be over.

The final point that the Catholic Church makes to explain why suicide is an “unforgivable sin” is that our lives are not our own and belong to God (Potter). The Catholic belief is that God, as the giver of life, is the owner of all lives and is graciously allowing man to use them in order to be His “faithful servants” (Potter). When God gives us our lives, He has already created a lifetime of purpose and plans for every person. To commit suicide is to reject His plans and refuse to live your life according to His word. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains that all people are “obligated to accept life gratefully and preserve it for His honor and the salvation of our souls” (2280). In other words, the Catholic Church is saying that every life is a gift and should be accepted with a desire to spread the good works of the Lord. By committing suicide, one is not only not using their life in the way that God intended for them, but they abandon the purpose given to them by God. God knows that “life is not without trials or hardship,” but it is still the one that He created for each and every person and should not be thrown away without fulfilling the purpose He bestowed upon us (Potter).

As Christians, we believe the Bible to be “timeless, holy, sacred, and true” as it is the inspired word of God (Potter). In other words, this means that the convictions of the Bible are considered the most accurate depictions of what Christians should believe and do. The Bible has seven different depictions of

suicide, including Abimelech asking his sword bearer to kill him, Samson destroying a temple with himself inside, King Saul and his armor bearing falling on their own swords, Ahithophel hanging himself, King Zimri burning to death after lighting his palace on fire, and Judas hanging himself after betraying Jesus. While none of these stories directly condemn suicide, they also do not place the act in a positive light. They may be seen as “cautionary warnings of how not to go” as there are other stories of people who were miserable in life and did not commit suicide, such as Rebekah, Rachel, Moses, Elijah, Job, Jonah, and apostle Paul (Hsu and Harris). These people, more often than the former, found fortune in their lives, showing that God wants us to persevere through our hardships. However, in other stories in the Bible, murder is denounced. In the ten commandments, God’s people are told specifically, “Thou shalt not kill” showing that God condemns murder, and, although it may be implied, suicide is not named (Potter). While looking specifically at the mention of suicide in the Bible, Christians are left with silence, but, if one were to look with the context of self-murder, it is obvious that God does not approve of the act.

Nevertheless, the Scripture has been interpreted in many different ways throughout the history of the Church. In the early days of the Church, some suicides were seen as “acceptable martyrdom” as that’s how they were portrayed in the Bible (Potter). The Bible also spoke on the act in a way that focused more on guidance and care. As time progressed, the Church moved away from the pastoral focus, in favor of others that say that suicide is “never God’s plan for anybody’s life” (qtd. in Potter). However, neither position can back up their claim with Biblical evidence as there is “no connection in Scripture” between suicide and how it should be handled within the Church (Hsu and Harris). Since there is no solid foundation for either stance, arguments for or against the condemning of suicide have continued for years. Considering that the Church does not place any credit on a belief “unless it is anchored to Scripture,” the teachings have been a “moving target” due to the silence on the exact act of suicide in the Bible. The Church’s exact teachings on the subject have changed and evolved over the years as it continues to analyze Scripture, in addition to other factors, and decide what is the most appropriate belief.

Following the shift in teachings, a reason why the Catholic Church does not believe that all those who commit suicide are bound for Hell is because the means by which someone dies does not negate their entire life. While some may assume that since suicide is a mortal sin and is committed with “full knowledge and deliberate consent,” almost every death occurs “without wholly cleansed consciences” (Potter; Hsu and Harris). More simply put, it is unfair to say that victims of suicide do not have eternal salvation because they did not repent for

their sins while anyone who dies by any other means are guaranteed salvation even without repenting for all their sins. Eternal salvation does not depend on asking forgiveness before death, but whether a person truly believes in God and lives by His Word. It is the Catholic belief that God does not deliberately send His followers to Hell, but He does give people free will to “say no to God and choose the path away from Him” (Hsu and Harris). The path away from Heaven requires more than a single act because a relationship with God is more than a “transactional manner” (Hsu and Harris). In other words, this means that a single sin will not cause complete separation from God. The way someone dies is not as critical for eternal salvation in comparison to whether that person had a firm and worthy relationship with God throughout their life.

The Church has also begun to look into mental illness and shift their teachings to include that mental illness does not detract from the hope for someone to reach heaven. As research into mental illness has continued to progress, the Church’s teachings have “become more nuanced” (Potter). They explain the complications involved in suicide, “Grave psychological disturbances, anguish, or grave fear of hardship, suffering, or torture can diminish the responsibility of the one committing suicide” (*Catechism* 552). This teaching shows that for someone to be in such an intense state of despair to commit suicide, they cannot be held responsible for their actions. At the time of their death, their mental capacity may not have been substantial enough to understand God’s call to life, but Christians believe that God is good enough to “discern how people would have responded to his invitation” in the best state of mind possible (Hsu and Harris). No one chooses suicide but rather the victims “stumble down into it from a steep slope of despair” (qtd. in Hsu and Harris). The Catholic Church’s teachings may continue to change as society learns more about the state of people facing severe mental illness, but as of today, Catholics believe that those who commit suicide due to mental illness are not well or lucid enough to be held responsible for their deaths.

While some may say that those who commit suicide can never go to Heaven because they took away their chance of repentance, no one knows what happens in the final moments of the victims lives except for God Himself. God makes the final decision on whether someone who commits suicide makes it into Heaven or not. Only He knows if someone who is currently dying “might regret his or her action and repent of it” (Potter). On Earth, no one knows the true timeline of when repentance is no longer possible, but believers do know that “God would never allow a person to perish without the full benefit of His mercy” (Potter). God wants His children to join Him in Heaven and will go to great lengths to love and forgive all His children. The Catholic Church says that people “should not despair of the eternal salvation of persons who have taken their own lives,” as God only

knows the contents of their heart and if they repented or not (*Catechism* 550). God sent His only son, Jesus, to die “for all of our sins, including suicide” (Hsu and Harris). While no one should strive for sin, God expects His children to make mistakes and gave His son for this reason. There is still good inside the people who commit suicide, so while “part of them may well deserve God’s judgment, another part may well receive God’s mercy” (Hsu and Harris). These new emphases help to reorientate the Church towards the innate Christian hope and belief in the mercy of God that Jesus reveals. It is beyond human knowledge to know what happens after death, so all who are left after a suicide must find “comfort in ignorance” and remember that “no one is beyond hope” for God’s mercy and love with or without repentance before death (Hsu and Harris).

As no one can know the mind or heart of someone committing suicide, the Catholic Church’s practice and teachings are becoming more considerate of those who attempt or commit suicide and their life after death. In recent years, the Catholic Church has allowed full Catholic funerals and burials in Catholic cemeteries for those who committed suicide. They have decreased their speaking on the subject as it is a sensitive subject, and the teachings are evolving quickly. Congregations are learning to forgive the victims of suicide “for they know not what they did,” and if God can grant them mercy, so can His children on Earth (Hsu and Harris). The focus has been shifting from condemning those who fall victim to suicide to helping and counseling those at risk of hurting themselves. Christians are responsible to help those struggling and at risk of suicide because of their call from God to “deliver messages of love, value, importance, and self-worth for those who are down or despondent” (Potter). Religion has become a primary factor in decreasing suicide as “the increase in suicides [are] keeping step with the de-Christianization of a country” (Vander Heeren). In other words, it is being proven that church can help to keep people away from committing suicide by providing help and safety to those who are struggling. Churches are beginning the fight against stigma and do not “shame, frighten or reject mental health consumers” in order to protect all people (Hsu and Harris). To conclude, the Catholic Church is shifting back to the more merciful view of understanding that God and His mercy have no bounds, so while suicide may be a serious and tragic action, it is not a sin that is unforgivable especially considering the afflictions that a person in that position may suffer.

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