

THE TROUBLING MYSTERY OF SUICIDE

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Dear Father Kerper: Long ago, my 27-year-old son died by what appeared to be suicide. I still grieve for him and always wonder what actually happened. I am a faithful Catholic and raised my son in the faith. Are there examples of suicide in the Bible that would help me understand what happens?

Every Catholic priest encounters two great mysteries: baptizing a newborn child, especially one who dies within seconds of pouring the water; and praying over a person who died by suicide.

During the last 35 years, I have done both. These events move me deeply; they also remind me that no words ever provide a satisfying explanation.

For sure, the Church has very clear words. As to babies who die after baptism, the Church firmly assures us that they have become saints. Regarding suicide, the Church teaches that suicide violates the Fifth Commandment: Thou shalt not kill. Period.

These teachings, though true and long-standing, evade the painful mystery of both events.

At the core of the mystery of suicide stands an apparent contradiction: God, who is infinite love, creates life; *and* God endows every human being with the freedom — and the ability — to end life, thereby facing eternal loss. How can this be?

Of course, we can search the endless pages of theology, philosophy and social science for answers. But as Christians, we have a briefer, yet richer, resource: Two stories of suicide embedded in sacred Scripture.

Here we find two very different men — Saul, the first king of Israel, and Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve directly chosen by the Lord.

Saul, who ruled Israel from 1021 to 1000 BC, started out as a just king who obeyed God and did much good. Over time, however, he became arrogant, petty, jealous and determined to retain his power, even to the point of trying to kill David, the rightful successor designated by God.

Saul committed suicide while battling the Philistines, the fierce enemies of Israel. Having been wounded multiple times by a barrage of arrows, he killed himself to end his pain and to avoid humiliation at the hands of his victorious enemies. For the full Biblical account, see 1 Samuel 31:1-30.

Now let's look at a curious twist. In 2 Kings 1:1-10, we find a *different account*. This text asserts that Saul, while suffering from his wounds, begged an Amalekite soldier to put him out of his misery. The soldier obliged. However, when David learned of this, he immediately ordered the soldier's execution, thereby upholding the commandment: Thou shalt not kill.

Furthermore, though sacred Scripture mentions Saul's suicide, we also find David lamenting his death and even singing his praises! Here's a snippet of David's song:

"The sword of Saul never came home unsated! Saul and David, beloved and handsome, were divided neither in life nor death. Swifter than eagles were they, stronger than lions." (2 Sm 1:22b-23)

The existence of these two *inspired* accounts of Saul's suicide/murder as well as David's praise, suggest that the Holy Spirit was making a point: no one fully and accurately knows the spiritual condition of those who take their own lives. Suicide remains a deep and troubling mystery.

Now to the suicide of Judas, much better known than Saul's end.

Judas differed from Saul immensely. Unlike Saul, Judas directly encountered the Messiah who, at Saul's time, was a vague figure who would eventually appear.

As Christians, we must believe the Lord's personal and trusting relationship with Judas had an enormous impact on him. Moreover, Jesus loved Judas to the bitter end — and beyond. Remember that Jesus still addressed Judas as "friend," even in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Saul's suicide (and/or request for mercy killing) emerged from his arrogant pride that could not endure the humiliation of defeat. Here he sadly resembles Hitler in his bunker.

Judas, by contrast, apparently became overwhelmed by remorse and grief about the death of the Lord, not about his own awful predicament. This unbalanced emotional response and inadequate belief in the infinite mercy of God generated the poison of despair — and suicide.

Frequent meditation on the stories of Saul and Judas may console those devastated by the suicide of loved ones.

First, both stories remind us that God himself is a "survivor" of suicide. God passionately loved Saul, even after sin deprived him of his crown. Moreover, David — the principal prototype of Christ in the Old Testament — *mourned* Saul's death. In effect, Christ also mourned over Saul in and

through David. Likewise, the Passion stories clearly show Jesus working to salvage his relationship with Judas. Indeed, the Lord even prepared a path toward eventual reconciliation for Judas and the other apostles.

Second, the open-ended and somewhat fuzzy quality of these stories frees people from the anguish of trying to resolve the *mystery of responsibility*.

Many survivors I've known constantly ask: "What if?" In the case of Saul and Judas, we can endlessly speculate, but we will never get an airtight answer. The same is true of every other act of suicide, whether certain, suspected or just plausible.

God, who knows and understands all mysteries, provided the following words of counsel, which appear in our funeral ritual:

*My soul is bereft of peace;
I have forgotten what happiness is.
But this I call to mind,
And therefore I have hope:
The steadfast love of the Lord
never ceases,
His mercies never come to an end;
They are new every morning.
It is good that one should wait in
silence. (Lam 3:17, 21-23, 26)*

Indeed, perhaps silence is the only — and best — answer when we grieve. ■



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St. Joseph inspires CMC's Preventative Food Pantry

It was 1961 when my mother was screaming the name Joseph repeatedly while she was in labor at St. Margaret's in Boston. After she delivered, the obstetrician went to tell my father the great news. He introduced himself, and called my father Joseph. My father said his name was Pasquale, not Joseph. My father told me later that the doctor was awkwardly embarrassed that my mother was calling out another man's name until he told the obstetrician that she often called on St. Joseph in times of pain and stress. Up until then, my parents hadn't decided on my name. While I'll never live up to St. Joseph, it's nice to shoot for such a high bar!

The month of March is dedicated to St. Joseph. Joseph was the husband of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the foster father of Jesus. St. Joseph is invoked as patron for many causes. He is the patron of the universal Church. He is the patron of the dying because Jesus and Mary were at his deathbed. He is also the patron of fathers and workers. In some communities, it is traditional to wear red clothing and eat a Neapolitan pastry, known as a zeppola, on St. Joseph's Day, which is March 19. Everything Italian seems to boil down to food in some way, shape or form. I, myself, am a foodie. I relish any chance I have to enjoy an Italian pastry. (I prefer cannoli.)

St. Joseph is also the patron saint of Sicily, and many Italian-American communities give thanks to him for preventing famine, so giving food to the needy is also a common St. Joseph's Day custom. But of course, hunger and food insecurity are problems that many people face all year long.

That's why, at Catholic Medical Center, we recently opened a Preventative Food Pantry for our patients with help from Catholic Charities New Hampshire's NH Food Bank and the Parish of the Transfiguration in Manchester. The genesis for the Preventative Food Pantry grew out of a conversation I had with NH Food Bank Executive Director Eileen Liponis in late 2017. Eileen heard about Boston Medical Center's Preventative Food Pantry, which opened in 2001 with the purpose of addressing nutrition-related illness and helping

undernourished, low-income patients. Patients are referred by their primary care providers, who write a "prescription" for supplemental foods that best promote physical health, prevent future illness and facilitate recovery.

This idea really resonated with me given the challenges I saw my patients face when I was a primary care physician: patients struggled with food insecurity and dietary restrictions related to illnesses like diabetes and congestive heart failure.

While we at CMC were eager to start our own Preventative Food Pantry, we didn't have the space to do it alone. A natural partner was the Parish of the Transfiguration, which already had a food pantry. A grant from the Bishop's Charitable Assistance Fund and the generosity of CMC's employee giving campaign enabled us to buy a new refrigerator and freezer to meet increasing food storage needs.

We opened our doors in January 2019 and served over 60 CMC patients and their families in the first year. Our prescriptions nearly doubled during the last three months of 2019. We anticipate that 2020 will prove to be a year when even more of our patients will get the foods they need to live healthier lives.

St. Joseph is truly smiling down upon us as we meet the nutritional needs of our patients! ■



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