

What is the Church's teaching regarding suicide? I always thought that suicide was a mortal sin, so how can a person receive a Christian Funeral Mass in the Church?

Before addressing the act of suicide, we must first remember that God is the giver of all life. Each of us has been made in God's image and likeness (Genesis 1:27) with both a body and a soul. Therefore, we must be mindful that the preservation of human life — body and soul — is not something discretionary, but obligatory. We must preserve and nourish both our physical and spiritual life. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) tells us, "Everyone is responsible for his life before God who has given it ... It is God who remains the sovereign Master of life. We are obliged to accept life gratefully and preserve it for ... the salvation of our souls. We are stewards, not owners, of the life God has entrusted to us. It is not ours to dispose of" (#2280).

The intentional taking of one's own life is wrong for several reasons: First, in the most basic sense, each human being naturally seeks to preserve his/her life. To take our own life defies our natural instinct to live. Second, suicide is an absence of genuine love for oneself and others — family, friends, neighbors, and even acquaintances. Other people need us and depend upon us in ways we may not even know. At times, sadly some people don't realize how much they really are loved and needed. When they face seemingly unbearable or insurmountable situations in life, they unfortunately choose to withdraw from the love of God and others, and take their own life.

We all face tough times, hardships, and sufferings. However, we are called to place ourselves in the hands of God; who will never abandon us, but see us safely through this life.

Objectively, suicide is a mortal sin (as is helping someone commit suicide is also). Here though we must remember that for a sin to be mortal and cost someone their eternal salvation, the objective action (e.g., the taking of one's own life): (1) Must be grave or serious matter; (2) The person must have an informed intellect (e.g., know that this is wrong); and (3) The person must give full consent of the will (e.g., intend to commit this action).

In the case of suicide, a person may not be in a normal, healthy state of mind to give their full and informed consent of the will. Fear, force, ignorance, desperation, and psychological problems can impede the exercise of the will. Here again the CCC states, "Grave psychological disturbances, anguish, or grave fear of hardship, suffering, or torture can diminish the responsibility of the one committing suicide" (#2282). This qualification does not make suicide a morally, right action in any circumstance; however, it does make us realize that a person may not be totally culpable for their action because of various circumstances or personal conditions.

Ultimately, only God can read the depths of our soul. Only He knows how much we love Him and how responsible we are for our actions. We leave the judgment then to Him alone. The Catechism offers to us words of great hope and encouragement: "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 repentance. The Church prays for persons who have taken their own lives" (#2283).

Therefore, we do and should offer the Mass for the repose of the soul of a suicide victim, invoking God's tender love and mercy, and His healing grace for the grieving loved ones also.

(SR: <http://catholiceducation.org/articles/religion/re0123.html>)