

Salutary repentance

Question: In the Catechism of the Catholic Church, it says that we should not despair for those who have taken their lives because, “By ways known to him alone, God can provide the opportunity for salutary repentance” (No. 2283). Can we assume that “opportunity for salutary repentance” is also given to all those who die suddenly?

– **Bill C.**, via email

Answer: For repentance to be salutary, it must be had prior to death or in the dying process. The Church does not teach that there is a repentance after death. Rather, death quickens the soul and our final disposition for or against God and the values of his kingdom is forever fixed or hardened. It is like pottery that can be shaped on the potter’s wheel. But once placed in the kiln, its shape is fixed or hardened.

Thus, in the case of suicide, the Church advances the possibility that in the process of dying one might regret their action and repent of it, calling for God’s mercy. Even in very sudden forms of death, such as a gunshot, it is likely that there are some moments prior to the soul departing the body where one might repent. Thus dying, while having some obvious physical qualities, also has some mysterious aspects related to the soul’s full departure to the judgment seat of Christ. It is to these mysteries that the Catechism refers. The same could be said for those who die suddenly. There may be some moments after physical death, but prior to the soul’s departure where repentance is still possible.

This understanding can give us hope that even the worst sinners may come to repentance in the very process of dying. For this reason, the Church has never officially declared that a particular individual is certainly in hell. Though this hope is available to us, we should not allow it to become

presumptuous, such that we lightly regard our need to repent daily. Scripture frequently warns of the need to be ready well before death. Many of Jesus' parables speak of his sudden coming and that there are some who are ready and some who are not. There are sheep and goats; those on the right and those on the left; wise virgins and foolish ones; servants who are ready on their master's return and those who are not. Hence we should trust and hope in God's mercy but not lightly presume upon it such that we disregard Jesus' teachings and warnings.

Singing Alleluia verses

Question: The Alleluia sung just before the Gospel at Mass has a verse. Must this verse always be sung?

– **Sister Teresa**, Brooklyn, New York

Answer: The most certain answer is that the Alleluia should be sung with its verse. However this is disputed since the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) says, "After the reading that immediately precedes the Gospel, the Alleluia or another chant laid down by the rubrics is sung. ... It is sung by everybody. ... The verse, on the other hand, is sung either by the choir or by a cantor. ... [T]he Alleluia or the Verse before the Gospel, if not sung, may be omitted" (GIRM No. 62). However, the Lectionary Instruction says, "The Alleluia or ... the verse before the Gospel ... must be sung, and during it all stand" (No. 23).

Thus, some feel free to omit the Alleluia altogether if it is not sung. Others feel free to sing the Alleluia but without its verse. The GIRM, however, seems to envision that a verse accompanies the Alleluia when sung. For this reason the most certain answer is that the verse should be sung.

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