

Suicide and the grieving people in the pews

Recently a story about a Detroit priest's homily at the funeral of a young man who died by suicide created a media storm. The parents were upset, the priest was attacked, and everyone had an opinion. I read the homily and, as a mother who lost a son to suicide, I did not read anything that offended me. However, I can see how this family and others in this situation would be hurt by it.

Losing a child to suicide is very traumatic. Not just because you are burying your kid, but because there are so many unanswered questions, so many regrets and so many "what ifs." It is your child, and in your mind as a parent, you failed them somehow.

Timeline of events

On Wednesday, March 8, 2017, my son Anthony took his own life in my home. I left him sitting on my couch to go pick up his brother Daniel from work. I left at 1 p.m., and Anthony called me on the phone at 1:51 to ask to use my car. Daniel and I paid for our food at a local drive thru at 2:20. That drive thru is about eight minutes from our house, so we walked back in the front door at approximately 2:28. Anthony was nowhere to be found.

I looked for him everywhere, including closets. The only place that I did not look was in the garage, which is where he was, meaning he must have died somewhere between 1:51 and 2:28 p.m. Unless he died while we were eating our takeout, which is a possibility that makes me gag every time I think about it.

All of that might sound like a police report to people who have not lost someone in a traumatic way like suicide. Because

that is what it feels like when all that information is going in my head. It is like a computer downloading information I pieced together using phone logs, receipts and any other information I needed in order to create a timeline of events. All of it was done involuntarily. My brain decided that is what we needed to do. I needed a timeline of events.

Every Wednesday for the first year after Anthony died, I went through that timeline in my head in real time. That was my way of coping. I was not able to handle anything else on Wednesdays, because I was busy putting pieces together to try and figure out where things went wrong. It's called "magical thinking," the idea that if you can just do the right thing now, figure out the code or see where things could have been different, that you can somehow magically change the outcome. It isn't reality. It is trauma. And that is what families who are dealing with suicide loss are going through.

The family impact

Suicide not only takes a life, but it also destroys the lives of the victim's loved ones. My husband, our other children, grandchildren and I are completely devastated by the suicide of my oldest son.

His oldest daughter went from being a happy and bubbly little girl who knew nothing but love and laughter to a five-year-old with panic attacks. Her daddy would never have done that to her on purpose, and only God knows what was going on in his mind and soul when he took his own life. Only God knows if Anthony is in heaven or not; nobody else has the right to damn or canonize my son. What everyone can do is pray for him and the other victims of suicide.

A priest should know the right balance between truth and love when dealing with a grieving family suffering from losing a child to suicide. The priest who preached the homily at Anthony's funeral is a close family friend. He walked with me

through my conversion in 2009, he baptized Anthony, and he was there the night that we found Anthony in the garage and blessed his body before it was taken away.



Losing a loved one to suicide creates inner chaos.
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And even then, he and I discussed what he would say at Anthony's funeral. He did that out of respect for me and my family, not so that I could dictate to him what to preach in homilies. He understood that this particular homily had to come from a place of love and respect. That is how all priests should treat grieving families.

A person who suffers a traumatic loss like suicide simply does not have the brain capacity to take in the kind of information that comes with a homily on the Catholic teaching on suicide, and it is cruel to try and make them. What ends up happening is chaos, because grief is already a chaotic situation. What pastoral care should focus on is trying to settle that chaos and make the situation as smooth as possible for a family that is living a nightmare nobody can understand without going through it themselves.

We need to do better. As a Church, as a pillar of our communities, as witnesses of Jesus Christ, we need to learn and to do better. Our children are dying – from suicide, from opioids, from gun violence, from mental illness and despair. People in our parishes are grieving, and we are failing them if we do not learn how to be better at speaking truth in love, and learn more about loss and trauma, so that we, as the Body of Christ, can minister to those who are suffering.

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