

A Gathered Cloud: Suicide and the Work of Flourish



The pain of suicide is one that has affected countless families in Ireland in recent decades. Indeed, such is its prevalence that there is a danger that we would become almost immune to the devastation visited upon families and communities when a person ends their life. As a priest I have, like many of my colleagues, had to try and offer what support I can to many bereaved people on the death of a loved one. Fr Ron Rolheiser OMI, speaks of death by suicide in the following way:

'All death unsettles us, but suicide leaves us with a very particular series of emotional, moral and religious scars. It brings with it an ache, a chaos, a darkness and a stigma that has to be experienced to be believed.'

Any death is surely unsettling because there are people left to mourn. Death by suicide is all the more difficult. Rolheiser suggests that the emotional, moral and religious scars are of a unique order. Those closest to the deceased undergo tremendous pain and chaos. They are

plunged into darkness and may experience stigma.

In their Pastoral Letter entitled, *Life is for Living: A Reflection on Suicide* (2004), the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference characterised suicide as *'a cloud which has gathered over Ireland'*, especially over the lives of many young people.

Today, the problem is still with us; in fact it has become worse.

As clergy, we are often thrown into the midst of chaos when called upon to attend the scene of one's death, as well as that first visit to the home of the deceased. Immediately we are thrust forward, by nature of our ministry, to try and make sense of everything and then to plan for and celebrate the funeral.

Of all the challenges faced in pastoral ministry perhaps the issue of suicide is the greatest. Challenges concerning one's approach to a bereaved family throw up questions like, 'what do I say?', 'how do I explain what has happened?', 'how do I prepare for the funeral?', 'do I mention suicide during the funeral?' and countless other difficult issues.

The need for support, and relevant training, for clergy involved in working with bereaved families and those in crisis often fails to be met. It is not unusual for a priest to have to seek support on his own in order to deal with the trauma of death by suicide in his community. In recent years an initiative called **Flourish** has attempted to reach out to clergy across the four main Christian churches in the north of Ireland in order to provide training and support in the area of mental health and suicide.

Lighthouse in Belfast has, over the years, developed a number of suicide awareness/mental health talks, within a range of church settings. There has been much interest from clergy, particularly after a suicide within the local parish/community.

Given the experience which Lighthouse has in working with families bereaved by suicide it was felt that clergy could benefit from the sharing of its experience and knowledge. A particular interest was expressed by clergy around identifying suicidal warning signs.



Jo Murphy is the director of Lighthouse, and having been asked to speak at a Christian family event in Castlewellan, Co Down, she felt that something 'magical' had occurred, and she believed unequivocally that this was such an important issue that there had to be a way of trying to get clergy to work together in dealing with it. From this point onwards Jo began having conversations with clergy she was already connected with and asked them how they felt about participating in the work of suicide awareness and prevention at an interdenominational level. And so the work of Flourish began ...

Today Flourish has a vibrant working group who seek to provide training and support to clergy from the various Christian churches. The training takes the form of a one day workshop, '*Theological Modules of Suicide*'. Two modules are offered: a **Faith-based module** and a **Pastoral Support module**. The aim of both is to explore the relationship between theological understandings of suicide and mental health and how this translates into pastoral action.

The first module explores suicide in sacred scripture as well as looking at some examples of major figures from scripture who suffered with depression. It goes on to examine the early Church's

view on suicide. In this module we also look at pastoral care so that we can try to get an understanding of what it is like for the suicidal person and we try to get an understanding of compassion.

Module two focuses on pastoral support, which seeks to look at worries, fears and concerns of clergy around this topic. Pastoral obligations to those left behind, their spiritual needs and how we meet them are explored. In this module there are, inevitably, many questions and comments on funerals and how we best prepare for, and celebrate them. Finally, the very important issue of self-care for clergy is discussed also.

The Theological Modules of Suicide offered by Flourish have been availed of by many clergy and church workers from all of the Christian churches and the response has been hugely positive.

As well as training, Flourish has published three resources, available on our website www.wewillflourish.com

- These resources are:
- Suicide Prevention & Emotional Wellbeing: Pastoral Guidelines and Training Directory for Churches
 - Flourish Sunday Worship Resources
 - Flourish Self-Care Toolkit

To date the Flourish initiative has been offered to churches in Northern Ireland with a pilot programme having also taken place in Dublin. It is our hope that clergy

will continue to avail of what we offer and that we can provide training and support on an island-wide basis.

Suicide touches every community in Ireland and so many lives are lost to it. Families, friends and colleagues are left devastated as a result. As a young twelve year old, I saw the impact on my father who had to deal with the suicide of a neighbour in 1978. Counselling and therapy were not available to him at that time. I also experienced the loss to our seminary community in the 1990s of one of our colleagues. I would urge anyone in need to seek help and support. As someone involved deeply in the work of Flourish, and as one who has received great support from my own diocese in pursuing this work, I would encourage those in Church leadership to have at least one priest/minister involved from your own diocese or church. Sadly, we ourselves have been touched by suicide among the clergy and again, I urge bishops and those in leadership to support the work of care for clergy.

I would also mention the annual one-day retreat in September at Lough Derg for all involved or impacted by suicide. Details from www.loughderg.org.

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