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Suicide is a misunderstood disease

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Faith & Family

Catholic Courier | Diocese of Rochester, NY | October 2004

Death is always painful, but its pains are compounded considerably if its cause is suicide. When a suicide occurs, we aren't just left with the loss of a person, we're also left with a legacy of anger, second-guessing and fearful anxiety.

Each year I write a column on suicide, hoping that it might help produce more understanding of the issue and offer some consolation to those who have lost a loved one to this dreadful disease.

What needs to be said about it?

First of all that it's a disease, and perhaps the most misunderstood of all diseases.

We think if a death is self-inflicted it is voluntary in a way that death through physical illness or accident is not. For most suicides, this isn't true. A person who falls victim to suicide dies, as does the victim of a terminal illness or fatal accident, not by his or her own choice. When people die from heart attacks, strokes, cancer, AIDS and accidents, they die against their will. The same is true of suicide, except that in the case of suicide the breakdown is emotional rather than physical — an emotional stroke, an emotional cancer, a breakdown of the emotional immune-system, an emotional fatality.

This is not an analogy. The two kinds of heart attacks, strokes, cancers, breakdowns of the immune system and fatal accidents are identical in that, in neither case, is the person leaving this world on the basis of a voluntary decision of his or her own will. In both cases, he or she is taken out of life against his or her own will. That's why we speak of someone as a



Father Ron Rolheiser

In Exile

"victim" of suicide.

Given this fact, we should not worry unduly about the eternal salvation of a suicide victim, believing (as we used to) that suicide is always an act of ultimate despair. God is infinitely more understanding that we are, and God's hands are infinitely safer and more gentle than our own. Imagine a loving mother having just given birth, welcoming her child onto her breast for the first time. That, I believe, is the best image we have available to understand how a suicide victim is received into the next life.

Knowing all of this however, doesn't necessarily take away our pain (and anger) at losing someone to suicide. Faith and understanding aren't meant to take our pain away but to give us hope, vision and support as we walk within it.

Finally, we should not unduly second-guess when we lose a loved one to suicide: "What might I have done? Where did I let this person down? If only I had been there? What if...?" It can be too easy to be haunted with the thought: "If only I'd been there at the right time." Rarely would this have made a difference. The person

who fell victim to this disease picked the moment, the spot and the means precisely so that we wouldn't be there. Perhaps it's more accurate to say that suicide is a disease that picks its victim precisely in such a way so as to exclude others and their attentiveness. This should not be an excuse for insensitivity, but it should be a healthy check against false guilt and fruitless second-guessing.

We're human beings, not God. People die of illness and accidents all the time and all the love and attentiveness in the world often cannot prevent a loved one from dying. Suicide is an sickness; there are some sicknesses that all the care and love in the world cannot cure.

A proper human and faith response to suicide should not be hor-

ror, fear for the victim's eternal salvation or guilty second-guessing about how we failed this person. Suicide is indeed a horrible way to die, but we must understand it (at least in most cases) as a sickness, a disease, an illness, a tragic breakdown within the emotional immune system. And then we must trust in God's goodness, understanding, power to descend into hell and power to redeem all things, even death, even death by suicide.

Oblate Father Ron Rolheiser is a theologian, teacher and award-winning author. He currently serves in Toronto and Rome as the general councilor for Canada for his religious order, the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

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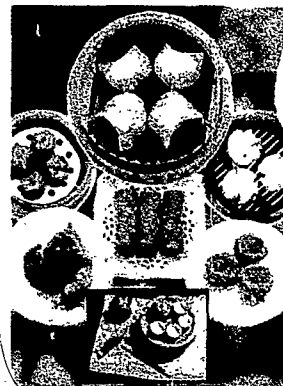
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