

THE KEYS



Church of St. Peter the Apostle
Anglican Catholic Diocese of the Mid-Atlantic States
www.dmas-acc.org

The Rev. Canon Peter Geromel, OHI, DMin - Rector
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<https://stpetersacc.org>

The Rector's Ramblings

Is Suicide an "Unforgivable Sin"?

We often think of Suicide as "Unforgivable" or leading directly to Hell, which is essentially the same consideration in our minds. In reality, there is only one "Unforgivable Sin" and that is blaspheming the Holy Spirit. (That, in itself, becomes its own rather involved discussion.) Now, we could simply say that suicide and that blaspheming are one and the same thing, but I think not. Rather, blaspheming the Holy Spirit entails, in some way, negating the possibility of asking forgiveness. If Jesus, for instance, "has a devil" (as the Pharisees believed) then no Pharisees will ask His forgiveness or ask for healing at his hands, and that is "blaspheming" the work of God, or of the Holy Spirit. Is that what is occurring with suicide? Perhaps. But not necessarily.

Suicide is precisely the sin of murder, self-murder. It is, as G.K. Chesterton says, to kill every man in killing oneself. It comes quite close to not asking forgiveness, probably entails some unforgiveness, but blaspheming the Holy Spirit tends to imply a "big surprise" – that is, one thinks one is holy and then gets to the Judgments Seat and finds out that, really, one isn't holy, one is condemned and then there is "wailing and gnashing of teeth". Actually, suicide rarely implies this kind of delusion. People know it is bad, but it seems the most logical possibility in the face of tons of other bad stuff to their way of thinking at the moment (or for too many moments leading up to the act, so that the thought of suicide has become "second nature", habitual, always just a moment away). The very fact that someone would think this action is logical, or inevitable, or necessary, implies to a level-headed individual a certain "instability of the mind" or as the old inquest language would say, "took his own life whilst the balance of his mind was disturbed." Indeed, there are some who say it is impossible to do without a certain measure of the darker forces being at work in an unusually malevolent way. So, quite possibly, both psychology and spiritual theology agree, and imply that the will has been distorted by something almost external, either mental instability or demonic oppression or possession, more likely both.

It is, however, in the realm of "Moral Theology" and not "Spiritual Theology" – to speak in terms of the theological categories involved – that we begin to talk about something being "unforgiveable." Why? Well, consider that Moral Theology is precisely that theological art and science that deals with the realm of Confession and Penance. Quite straightforwardly, neither is possible in the case of Suicide. The person, unlike most other sinners, cannot be reconciled with Christ *through the Life of the Church*. That is what Confession and Penance is for.

Side point: It is true that suicides are not permitted to be buried in hallowed ground. Yes, but neither are children, even miscarriages, not having been baptized. Both are tragic, by the way. Someone who is excommunicated for other things besides suicide cannot be buried on hallowed ground either. In time past, to be clear, there were many who would not have been permitted to be so interred. For example, in the Laws of King Athelstan, "And if anyone swears a false oath and it becomes manifest he has done so, he shall never again have the right to swear an oath; and he shall not be buried in any consecrated burial ground when he dies, unless he has the testimony of the bishop, in whose diocese he is, that he has made such amends as his confessor has prescribed to him." Jack Kehoe, of the Molly Maguires, was not permitted to be buried on consecrated ground in Tamaqua, Pennsylvania, because the Roman Church declared anyone who engaged in those terroristic actions of that organization to be excommunicated. (Of course, since then the cemetery has grown and now "Black Jack" Kehoe is in the consecrated part, so I'm told. So I guess his time in Purgatory must be over! Just Kidding. Maybe.)

But that leads rather nicely to my next point. The graveyard has sacramental significance. The consecrated ground is an outward and visible sign (less clearly defined, which makes it a sacramental) of an inward and visible grace. It is connected quite appropriately with the Jewish Rabbinic notion that no one not buried in the Holy Land would participate in the Resurrection of the Just. (That is why ground from the Holy Land is often buried with those of that Religion.) The notion in the Christian Church was that the graveyard, lying within the sacred bounds of the Church, was part of the New Israel, the New Temple, in an iconic and sacramental form, and those interred there would not need to be buried in the Holy Land, but would still have a partaking of the Resurrection of the Just. This is accurately connected with our Baptisms, whereby we become Temples of the Holy Spirit, and have no need any longer of a Holy Land, because our ultimate Jerusalem, incidentally, is in the Heavens, of which the local church is an icon. But the unbaptized and excommunicate technically belong outside of that churchyard, symbolically reflecting Revelation 22:15, "But outside are dogs and sorcerers and sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters and whoever loves and practices a lie." Does that mean that we send them to hell by not burying them in the churchyard? No. The action is a symbol, an icon, of a larger, heavenly, truth.

Does that mean that we have the power, as the Church, to keep someone out of Heaven? Yes, and no. We bind on earth and bind in heaven, and we loose on earth and loose in heaven, as Christian priests, on behalf of the Church. (There are fascinating - apocryphal? - stories of excommunicate folks not having rest until the very bishop who excommunicated him or her pronounced the absolution, eerie stories, bound up in the margins of Church histories.) Bishop Lerow has informed me that, yes, some excommunications must be undone by the very bishop who pronounced them. And yet the Confession manuals and Visitations of the Sick also have prayers a parish priest can say to release a person from ecclesiastical censures. The absolution of the body as the caskets enters or is about to leave the Church, post death, is an important aspect of this. It should be remembered, however, that these actions must be confirmed by the ultimate Judge. Absolutions and excommunications are contingent upon the One Whom we, his unworthy ministers, represent. Earlier in Revelation 3:7 it says, "These things says He who is holy, He who is true. "He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens." I know your works."

Reaching back further, in the Old Testament Law of Moses, there is a lot of capital punishment in the midst of all sorts of rules and laws, which are, if you read them carefully, means and measures, for restoring and reconciling an offender or unhealthy person to the community. Interestingly enough, the same Old Testament word for excommunication "to be cut off" is often the word translated as "death" - *Karath*. When Christ says that we are to "Cut off" our hand lest it cause us to sin, this is that kind of judgment. The hand will die. The hand will be severed from the body and, without the blood flow, will wither up. Capital punishment in the Old Testament is a means of excommunication and death, certainly. But it should also be understood that what is subtly happening is that there, in that law, there is simply no way to reconcile that person to the community appropriately or justly. Capital punishment is a way of sending someone directly to the highest authority, to appeal the case to the dread judge of all mankind.

It is true that a suicide has, in the midst of that irreversible action, made it impossible to reconcile with family and friends, and Holy Mother the Church on earth; it is true that such an one has "cut" himself off from the land of the living. But at the same time, it is, tragically, a form of self-capital punishment as well as self-murder. That particular person is, also - whether realizing it or not - appealing to the highest judge. It isn't the best case scenario that we could imagine. The suicidal person doesn't technically have that "right" of appeal. But the suicide has appealed nonetheless. He has gone and claimed sanctuary in the the ultimate "sanctuary city" from whatever imagined or real woe was chasing him. Whether such an one gets sanctuary is another matter. It isn't anything but tragic. It's a horrible example to others. But so are all scenarios leading to capital punishment. If one wishes to escape judgment, suicide is not the option that will avoid it. But at the same time, God is judge. God is love. God is the ultimate arbitrator in the situation. They've chucked our and the Church's judgment. It was a decision that we couldn't take from them.

Finally, it has become the ever-increasing practice, a change - and change is not something that folks usually associate with traditionalists - to celebrate Requiem masses even for suicides. A couple of reasons come to mind why this is meet and right. First is because we have become more and more aware of how sin, addictions in particular (even addictions to anger), are a slow form of suicide, self-destruction, anyways. It would be particularly illogical for us to celebrate a mass for someone who slowly killed himself through the addictive use of substances and alcohol (or anger) and not for someone who does it more quickly. Indeed, the two slow demise and the quick death seem to be all too often codependently linked. Addictions lead to suicide, but the

addictions would have killed the person eventually. Overdoses are rather obviously connected with this trajectory of self-destruction as well. The other reason we seem to now be celebrating Requiems for these unfortunates is because in their cases the Church has seemed to recognize the mental anguish and instability that has occurred at the time (and we've realized that mental anguish and instability are also increased through the use of substances, even medications, in a vicious self-destructive cycle of self-abuse and self-medication). Indeed, the person, by external and internal factors, has seemed to propel himself or herself along a path we can hardly understand and which has landed them in the arms of a merciful and just One – even if that Just One has denied the appeal and handed them into the arms of someone far less kind or just – we pray not. Progress in practice in this regard is permitted and shown in Holy Writ. In the Old Testament story of Achan, Joshua 7, Achan pillaged against the Lord's command and a battle was lost because of it. "Thus, Joshua said to Achan, "Give glory to the Lord God of Israel today and make confession. Tell me what you did and hide nothing from me." Israel still stoned Achan. A similar (but different) incident occurred in 2 Maccabees 12, where in the tunics of the felled in battle were found little idols. The slain died for their sins and in their sins, having had no time to repent and make restitution (sin offering) in the Temple, Judas Maccabeus gathered up a collection to make restitution for them: "Thus he made atonement for the fallen, so as to set them free from their transgression" (12:44). (That Achan had stolen an idol is hinted at in Joshua 6, because the precious metals were holy to the Lord and brought into the treasury of the Lord, except what was "accursed." That would seem to imply something idolatrous or sorcery related had been kept. This likely fact emphasizes the parallels between the two stories.)

Suicides, too, have died with dark idols, malevolent burdens, metaphysically hung around their necks. We can, as the Church, do little else, having been sadly handed the self-determined action of another to juggle and struggle over, than do what we do best and pray in all charity, commend them with bittersweet and trembling well-wishes and hopeful prayers, even, in some sense, atoning prayers – you never know; they could atone. We commend them to the Loving arms of a Merciful Savior, and even the words of the Offertory sentence in the Requiem seem to be particularly apt under the circumstances of suicides: "O Lord Jesu Christ, King of glory, deliver the souls of all the faithful departed from the pains of hell, and from the bottomless pit: deliver them from the lion's mouth, that hell swallow them not up, that they fall not into darkness: but let Michael the standard-bearer bring them into the holy light."

News and Information

Wednesday, Apr. 24, Mass at 7 pm; Vestry at 7:30 PM.

Thursday, Apr. 25, Mass at 12 Noon for St. Mark the Evangelist

NEW SERVICE on Sundays at 6 PM. Saturday evening mass canceled until further notice.

APRIL, 2024						
SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
	[1]	[2]	[3]	[4] 12 noon HC	[5]	[6] 5:00 p.m. HC
[7] 8:00 a.m. MP & HC 10:00 a.m. HE, SS EASTER I	[8]	[9]	[10]	[11] 12 noon HC	[12]	[13]
[14] 8:00 a.m. MP & HC 10:00 a.m. HE, SS 6:00 p.m. EP & HC EASTER II	[15]	[16]	[17] 6:00 p.m. HC	[18] 12 noon HC	[19]	[20]
[21] 8:00 a.m. MP & HC 10:00 a.m. HE, SS 6:00 p.m. EP & HC EASTER III	[22]	[23]	[24] 7:00 p.m. HC 7:30 p.m. Vestry	[25] 12 noon HC ST. MARK EVANGELIST	[26]	[27]
[28] 8:00 a.m. MP & HC 10:00 a.m. HE, SS 6:00 p.m. EP & HC EASTER IV	[29]	[30]	LEGEND: HC - Holy Communion; FHE – Festal Holy Eucharist; HE - Holy Eucharist; SS – Sunday School; PG - Prayer Group; EP – Evening Prayer; MP – Morning Prayer; P&HU – Prayers and Holy Unction			

IN THE LORD'S SERVICE

If you cannot fulfill your assigned duty because of an urgent reason, PLEASE SECURE A REPLACEMENT.

	April 7	April 14	April 21	April 28	May 5
Coffee Hour	C. Kurstedt	V. Williams	C. DeRosset	L. Olver	B. Von Claparede
Epistoler 8 a.m.	D. Drysdale	C. Von Claparede	D. Drysdale	C. Von Claparede	D. Drysdale
Epistoler 10 a.m.	P. Williams	T. Paisley	G. Terrell	P. Williams	T. Paisley

Altar servers and ushers will be assigned as available before each service.

2024 Vestry (term end): George Mauney (‘25), Lisa Olver (‘24), Ted Paisley (‘24),
Mike Slayton (‘25), George Terrell (‘26), Vicki Williams (‘26)