

SUICIDE

“Not only is suicide a sin, it is *the* sin. It is the ultimate and absolute evil, the refusal to take the oath of loyalty to life.”

G K Chesterton¹

There can hardly be anyone, at least in the western world, who has not known someone who has committed suicide. My first experience of the evil occurred some fifty years ago: the most recent occurred just the other day. Each man killed himself in the same fashion.

One Sunday in 1956 or 1957 Peter, a Greek gardener and handyman, came looking for work at our Norwood, South Australia, home. Every weekend for years thereafter he would cycle ponderously the ten or so miles from his home on the western side of Adelaide to our home. He assisted with the renovation work on the old blue stone house. During one period of school holidays which coincided with his annual leave, I worked with him on the first floor balcony. Then his visits ceased.

A few months passed and he paid us a courtesy call with his bride, a girl he had brought to Australia from Greece with his hard won earnings. Our mother insisted on the proprieties so we children were brought in to meet the young couple in the lounge room. Peter seemed happy enough, but his new wife, constrained by a lack of English, seemed bereft of enthusiasm.

A month or two later two Greek men, his brothers, came to the house to collect Peter's belongings. My father told me in a subdued voice that Peter had ridden his heavy bicycle under a train.

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Suicide has two aspects, objective and subjective.

St Thomas teaches that the higher the species of God's creatures, the greater is the variety to be found among the instances of that species. There is, thus, more variety between one horse and another than between one oak tree and another; and there is much greater variety between one man and another than there is between horses. When it comes to the angels, the variety is so great that each angel fills its species, so that the angels differ from each other specifically. The immense variety among men manifests itself uniquely in each. No man is the duplicate of another.

Where one man can cope with the greatest adversity, another will be brought to his knees. Where one man is invested with sensitivity; another has little, or none. Where one man is strong; another is weak. Yet every man has his strengths, even a man his fellows may regard as contemptible. Every man, according to the judgement of St Thomas, is superior and inferior to every other man under some

¹ *Orthodoxy*, London, 1908, Ch. v, 'The Flag of the World'; my copy Fontana Books, 1963, p. 71.

respect. The richness of society lies precisely in this diversity of the strengths and weaknesses of its members.

What, objectively taken, is more irrational for a man than to commit suicide? “What can a man give in exchange for his soul?”² I have known six people who have killed themselves. Three of the six, at least, were subject to fits of black depression. Four were Catholics. Each of these four was, at least nominally, aware that while he might destroy his body, he could never destroy his soul. Each was, at least nominally, aware that the inevitable result of his act was that he would be confronted by his Judge, Jesus Christ, God become man, who suffered and died for him; and that at stake was his eternal destiny. Why would he commit such an act? Aristotle’s judgement hardly answers the question.

“Whilst it is true that the suicide braves death, he does it not for some noble object but to escape some ill.”³

We cannot weigh the subjective dispositions of each human heart. That is for God alone. We can only regard the objective reality of the evil the suicide commits.

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Human freedom is grounded in the absolute power to choose one course or another. Yet this, *natural* liberty, is not the liberty proper to man. It is but *matter* to the *form* of that liberty by which a man chooses ends which befit his dignity. In order that his liberty be true liberty, then, it must be conformed to law, i.e., to the ordination of reason, whether natural or positive law. As Leo XIII said—

“Nothing more foolish can be uttered or conceived than the notion that, because man is free by nature, he is therefore exempt from law.” [*Libertas praestantissimum*, 20th June 1888, n. 7]

According to his absolute power, a man can kill himself, as he can kill another. But, such an act is not in conformity with his moral liberty because it is against reason.

One hundred years ago no suicide could be buried in consecrated ground. The world was still a (relatively) rational place: the vast majority of men believed in God and rejected the sneering *philosophes*. Even those not invested with the inestimable gift of the Catholic faith yet retained a respect for the truth—*I did not bring myself into existence; I do not keep myself in existence; ergo I am dependent upon some greater being than myself*. The full implications of the rejection of God implicit in the virus sown by Martin Luther and Henry Tudor had not yet manifested themselves. Suicide was seen by Protestant and Catholic alike for what it is, the betrayal God’s bounty. Few would have disagreed with Chesterton’s stringent analysis—

“The man who kills a man, kills a man. The man who kills himself, kills all men; as far as he is concerned, he wipes out the world. His act is worse (symbolically considered) than any rape or dynamite outrage. For it destroys all buildings: it insults all women. The thief is satisfied with diamonds; but the suicide is not: that is *his* crime. He cannot be bribed, even by the blazing stones of the Celestial City. The thief compliments the thing he steals, if not the owner of them. But the suicide

² *Matthew* 16: 26

³ Said to be found in the *Nichomachean Ethics*.

insults everything on earth by not stealing it. He defiles every flower by refusing to live for its sake. There is not a tiny creature in the cosmos at whom his death is not a sneer. When a man hangs himself on a tree, the leaves might fall off in anger and the birds fly away in fury: for each has received a personal affront... There is a meaning in burying the suicide apart. The man's crime is different from other crimes—for it makes even crimes impossible..."⁴

No one chooses life: it is given him. No one brings himself into existence: this, too, is given him. No one keeps himself in existence. The materialist takes each of these realities, and the goodness that attends them, for granted. Like a petulant child, he asks *How could there be a God when there is so much evil in the world?* This is precisely the wrong question. It is not the evil that needs explanation; it is the good. Whence come the great goods that are given us?⁵

Today the public attitude to suicide in the dissolute West is, at best, ambivalent and, at worst, indulgent. Anecdotal evidence indicates that more than half the populace are in favour of euthanasia. For all practical purposes they are atheists; hardly surprising considering how subjectivism and materialism dominate the public psyche—the one ensuring the individual is driven by opinion not reality; the other, that the only part of reality he will acknowledge is the material. *Quem Jupiter vult perdere, dementat prius.* "He whom Jupiter wishes to destroy, he first makes mad."⁶ There is an essential link between the modern thinker and the suicide. Each behaves irrationally, for each denies reality.

Yet the root of the problem of each lies not in the intellect but the will, a will fixed in denying any conclusion but that which suits him.

"[A]lthough the will cannot force the intellect to see an object other than it is, it can turn it away from the object altogether, and prevent it from considering that thing at all."⁷

As fresh air can never penetrate a sealed room, neither can reason penetrate the heart of one who has closed his mind; and he may close his mind in any number of ways. One who lives in systematic denial of the duties he owes God and his fellow man will not escape the consequences.

Suicide is just as much murder as murder properly so called: each kills an innocent human being. The thin end of the euthanasia wedge is, of course, personal euthanasia, or suicide. And just as the clamour for the *fiat* of self destruction grows among decadent western Christians, it is answered by a cry which has long characterised the Muslim—a man is justified in committing suicide if in doing so he kills others he deems guilty of some wrongdoing. So is the folly of the materialist answered by a folly which is even greater.

⁴ *Orthodoxy*, op. cit., pp. 71-2.

⁵ And there is much more than existence. For not only is it given to a man *that* he is, but also *what* he is. And *the what* is itself to be distinguished into the *matter* of which he is comprised, and the *form* that makes him be a man and not a donkey, a monkey or a fish.

⁶ Attributed to Homer; cf. James Duport (1606-79) *Homeri Gnomologia*, 1660, p. 282.

⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 1948, New York: my edition *Elected Silence*, (edited and shortened), Universe Books edition, 1961, at pp. 150-1.

The mind that advocates or defends murder, whether of another or of oneself, is formed in the influence of mankind's ancient enemy, the Devil. "He was a murderer from the start... never grounded in the truth... a liar and the father of lies."⁸ The inevitable destination of the suicide, of the murderer, is Hell—unless he repents.⁹

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Modernist priests, their faith grown feeble through disobedience and systematic abuse of the Church's liturgy, are wont to console those mourning the death of a suicide by telling them not to worry unduly; that God is gentle and welcoming in all circumstances. Nothing better demonstrates their stupidity.

Yet there is hope for those confronted with the suicide of a family member or friend as the following, taken from the life of St John Vianney, demonstrates.

"One day [in 1855 or 1856] the Abbé Guillaumet, for many years Superior of the Immaculate Conception at Saint Dizier, was on his way to Ars... The only subject of conversation in the [train] compartment was the marvels that were taking place [there]. Seated beside the priest was a lady [in mourning for her late husband who had committed suicide] who was listening with rapt attention. On reaching the station of Villefranche, M. Guillaumet was about to alight when [she asked]: 'Monsieur L'Abbé, will you allow me to accompany you to Ars? I may as well go there as elsewhere...'

"The priest consented to act as guide to the stranger when once they had reached the village. The carriage which they took at Villefranche set them down right in front of the church. The eleven o'clock catechism was drawing to a close, so M. Guillaumet led the lady to a place between the church and the presbytery. They had not long to wait. Suddenly the Curé d'Ars appeared, still wearing his surplice. He stopped in front of the lady in black who, following the example of the crowd, had gone down on her knees. He bent over her and whispered into her ear: 'He is saved!'. A gesture of incredulity was the only reply of the stranger. Whereupon the saint, stressing each word, repeated: 'I tell you he is saved. He is in Purgatory and you must pray for him. Between the parapet of the bridge and the water he had time to make an act of contrition. Our Blessed Lady obtained that grace for him. Remember the shrine that you put up in your room during the month of May. Though your husband professed to have no religion, he sometimes joined in your prayers; this merited for him the grace of repentance and pardon at the last moment.'"¹⁰

Yes, there is hope—for those who put their trust in God, and not in human opinion.

Michael Baker

5th February 2010—*St Agatha, Virgin & Martyr*

⁸ *John* 8: 44

⁹ Cf. *Revelation* 21: 8; 22: 15; 1 *John* 3: 15

¹⁰ Abbé Francis Trochu, *The Curé d'Ars, St Jean Marie Baptiste Vianney*, London, 1927; my copy, Tan Books reprint, Rockford Illinois, 1977, at pp. 539, 540.