A STEP TOWARD HEALING THE WOUNDS OF SUICIDE SURVIVORS

FEATURE STORY

SUICIDE IS THE 11TH LEADING CAUSE OF DEATH IN LOUISIANA.

According to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, it is also the state’s third leading cause of death among those ages 15–34, as well as the fourth leading cause among the age groups of 10-14 and 35-54. This means that on average, somebody somewhere in Louisiana dies by suicide every 13 hours. Specifically within the Lafayette Diocese, statistics indicate that Evangeline civil parish has the highest suicide rate throughout Louisiana, while the civil parishes of St. Landry, Acadia, St. Martin, and Iberia also rank in the top 20 overall.

Do those statistics surprise you? Then imagine for a moment that these statistics are more than just numbers. They are the faces of loved ones—of children, parents, other relatives, and friends—who in this lifetime we can never look upon again.

Is it an unforgiveable sin that they committed, one that automatically condemns them to hell and denies us the comfort of hope that we might be reunited with them in heaven?

Not according to the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, contrary to the misconceptions that many people unfortunately hold. In the last two years Deacon Barney Lejeune has gathered a lot of information in this regard, and now he’s eager to share it with others in the hopes it can encourage suicide survivors to heal.

GET HELP

Are you, or is someone you love, contemplating suicide? Please call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1.800.273.TALK (8255).
“A suicide survivor is someone who lost a friend or a loved one to suicide, not someone who survived a suicide attempt,” he clarifies. “When I ask people who have lost a friend or a loved one to suicide if they sought help or counseling after their loss, they almost all tell me no. I believe that we have literally thousands of people in our diocese who are hurting from the loss of a loved one to suicide—many times they are our friends or our co-workers, and they are too embarrassed to tell us of their pain.”

For Deacon Barney, this pain is something that he knows firsthand. He and his wife Paula lost their daughter Andrea to suicide on Memorial Day in 2014.

“She was 27 years old when she took her life,” he reflects. “Since Andrea’s death, God has put me in contact with many people—I would guess close to 100—who have lost a loved one to suicide. Almost all of them have two questions.”

The first question Deacon Barney often encounters in these conversations with other suicide survivors is whether or not their loved ones have a chance of going to heaven, or if they have been condemned to hell. The second question is simply why.

While the simpler question is often harder to answer, Deacon Barney finds solace in the answers that the Church offers to the first. Yes, the Catechism of the Catholic Church clearly states that suicide is forbidden by the fifth commandment (2325), and that everyone must be responsible stewards of the life God has granted to each of us (2280). However, the Catechism also emphasizes that:

“We should not despair of the eternal salvation of persons who have taken their own lives. By ways known to him alone, God can provide the opportunity for salutary repentance. The Church prays for persons who have taken their own lives.” (2283) This passage also references that, “God predestines no one to go to hell; for this, a willful turning away from God (a mortal sin) is necessary, and persistence in it until the end.” (1037) Furthermore, the Catechism acknowledges that, “Grave psychological disturbances, anguish, or grave fear of hardship, suffering, or torture can diminish the responsibility of the one committing suicide.” (2282)

The longer we don’t tell our story, the more we grow ourselves around the pain of what is not told. The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention recognizes these very types of stressors as high risk factors. Statistical evidence supports that individuals who suffer from mental health conditions (depression, anxiety disorder, schizophrenia, etc.), substance abuse, chronic health and pain disorders, and even environmental influences such as divorce, unemployment, harassment/bullying, and the deaths of other loved ones are more prone to suicide.

“I think where help is needed is in creating an environment where people can talk freely and get answers,” he suggests. “Maybe even forming suicide survivor support groups in each region of the diocese.”

In an effort to achieve these goals, Deacon Barney reached out to the Office of Marriage & Family Life Ministry. The office currently offers counseling assistance to those who are suffering or grieving, but additional support specifically attuned to the needs of suicide survivors is still a necessity. A committee has been formed, with Deacon Barney serving as its chair, to explore options and to help build relationships with established organizations such as the Jacob Crouch Foundation (www.crouchfoundation.org), thus allowing the diocese to grow and expand its resources in offering this much needed support.

“I think there’s a need for this in our diocese, and I really believe we’ve got to spread our wings to act on it,” says Deacon Barney. “Our loved ones who died by suicide did not commit a crime. We should not feel even the tiniest bit of shame about how they died.”

Through this type of outreach to suicide survivors, Deacon Barney hopes our church parish communities can help to dispel those shameful stigmas. Offering something as simple as a gathering place where people can speak up and seek answers to the painful questions weighing on their minds could certainly prove to be a start. It reminds him of a quote by the poet Mark Nepo he discovered during his research:

“The longer we don’t tell our story, the more we grow ourselves around the pain of what is not told. The truth is that telling heals. Not just once, but as a God given way to flush out the buildup of scar tissue that clogs our being. This is one fundamental purpose of the human voice: to irrigate the heart damned up with experience. And once the telling begins ... it shows us how to lose and how to heal ... how to face what seems unfaceable.”

LEARN MORE
Suicide survivors who are interested in learning more about the diocese’s ongoing efforts to establish this support ministry, or in volunteering to help with these efforts, are urged to contact the Office of Marriage & Family Life Ministry at 337.261.5563.