The Marist Way of Grieving a Loss from Suicide – Pray Constantly and with Hope

Part One

"*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."

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (#2283)

I want to reflect on the Marist Way of grieving when a member of the Marist Fam. has taken their life. These reflections are years in the making, having attended too many funerals of those who have ended their lives prematurely and seen the tears and heard the cries of those left behind. In the spirit of Mary, I have pondered this sad reality in the context of our faith. These reflections are meant to provide some measure of comfort, consolation, and hope to those left behind feeling dazed, confused, and devastated.

As we will see in these reflections, the teaching of the Church gives a solid basis for having hope that a person who has taken their life is not lost to being found by God's mercy. The parable of the lost sheep clarifies the lengths to which God will go to find us when we have lost our way. We will learn that our prayers can play an important role in influencing a loved one, at the hour of their death, to accept Christ's offer of forgiveness and be embraced by God's mercy. We will look at how the spiritual impact of our prayers in the present and the future is "retroactive." We will also consider the role our Blessed Mother plays in interceding for anyone who has made a desperate plea for help by taking their life. We will conclude that we have good reason to pray constantly and with hope. The bottom line is that anyone who has taken their life is not a lost cause.

I want to begin by correcting any misunderstandings about the Catholic Church's teaching relative to suicide. The Church does not teach anyone who commits suicide will be denied eternal salvation. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, "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). I will return to this later. I want that teaching to serve as a backdrop to what will follow. Let us begin the first reflection by reviewing why God prohibits us from taking our life.

The Church teaches that life is sacred from conception until natural death. God is the giver of all life, and we humans are made in God's image and likeness. Consequently, no one can justify taking innocent human life. To this end, the Catechism teaches, "*Everyone is responsible for his life before God who has given it to him*. It is God who remains the sovereign Master of life. We are obliged to accept life gratefully and preserve it for his honor and the salvation of our souls. We are stewards, not owners, of the life God has entrusted to us. It is not ours to dispose of" (#2280).

First, we are naturally disposed to preserve our life. God designed us this way. To take our life is contrary to the natural instincts that God instilled in us. Those instincts speak to the reality that God has given us the gift of life, and only God can require it at the time he has chosen. To take our own life is to appropriate for ourselves a prerogative that belongs to God and God alone. That is called sin. God created us for a purpose and depends on our cooperation to fulfill the task with our name on it. Ending one's life means that the task will go unfulfilled. People who would have benefitted from our efforts will be denied them. What if that task was to find the cure for cancer?

Second, suicide negates the love we should have for ourselves and our family, friends, and others. It goes against this command of Jesus. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and love your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27). The

reality is that people appreciate us, look up to us, depend on us and love us. To take one's life will undoubtedly break the hearts of those who are left behind, leaving them emotionally scarred for the remainder of their lives and haunted by wondering how they missed the signs or what they could have done differently. That is not what "love your neighbor as yourself" looks like.

Thirdly, it is a failure to trust in God's providence when we question whether life is worth living in those moments when the answer is up for grabs. It is unrealistic to expect to go through life without hardships. God is not like a snowplow going before us to make life smooth and easy. Luke records the Apostles Paul and Barnabas as they depart from Iconium, making that point to the new disciples there. "They strengthened the spirits of the disciples and exhorted them to persevere in the faith, saying, 'It is necessary for us to undergo many hardships to enter the kingdom of God'" (Acts. 14:22).

When life feels particularly harsh and meaningless, it should lead us to fall on our knees and pray for increased faith. Fr. Mike Schmitz, a popular author, speaker, podcaster, and Director of Youth and Young Adult Ministries in the Diocese of Duluth, MN, has a particular name for this faith. He calls it courageous or heroic faith. Believing that our suffering has meaning even when it feels meaningless requires courageous faith. Believing that God loves us when our pain and anguish seem to never end requires courageous faith. Believing that God will get us through whatever crisis we are undergoing requires courageous faith. Believing that God is with us when he feels absent requires courageous faith. That is what we are asking for when we pray for an increase in faith. We can learn from the saints what courageous faith looks like from how they endured their trials.

Fourth, for those who think that every suicide is mortally sinful, remember the three conditions that must be met for that to be true. First, the matter must be severe or grave. Secondly, a person must know it is wrong. Third, a person must give full and free consent of the will.

This latter condition requires further explanation. The Catechism states, "Grave psychological disturbances, anguish, or grave fear of hardship, suffering, or torture[1] can diminish the responsibility of the one committing suicide" (#2282). When a person commits suicide, they are driven by their pain and anguish, leaving them unable to "think straight." Consequently, they would be unable to give full consent of the will or freely choose what they may feel compelled to do because they are so psychologically or emotionally distraught. Still, to take one's life is a serious sin, even if it may not always be a mortal sin.[2]

Depression, which I will address in the following reflection, is an example of the kind of anguish about which the Catechism speaks. All that is to say, a person's freedom may be severely compromised by circumstances or personal trials that will remain hidden and unknown to us in this life but are known to God alone. That is why God is slow to anger and rich in mercy. (Exodus 34:6-7) *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, "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).

I will speak more about this in the following reflection.

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[1] Torture could include a form of mental distress such as depression.

[2] *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches, **"**Mortal sin is a radical possibility of human freedom, as is love itself. It results in the loss of charity and the privation of sanctifying grace, that is, of the state of grace. If it is not redeemed by repentance and God's forgiveness, it causes exclusion from Christ's kingdom and the eternal death of hell, for our freedom has the power to make choices for ever, with no turning back. However, although we can judge that an act is in itself a grave offense, we must entrust judgment of persons to the justice and mercy of God." (1861)

The Marist Way of Grieving a Loss from Suicide – Pray Constantly and with Hope

Part Two

"*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."

The Catechism of the Catholic Church, #2283

The Church is giving us reason to hope that a loved one who has taken their life can still be welcomed into the bliss of heaven. I suspect some time will be spent in purgatory,[3] where the opportunity for salutary repentance[4] will be provided. That will be akin to renewing our baptismal promises and examining our conscience. Both will be thorough and intense but also liberating and healing.

To anyone who has suffered from the suicide of a son or daughter, brother or sister, spouse, classmate, or friend, I am confident that he or she would want to say to you, "I am so sorry for the pain and suffering I have caused you. If I could relive that moment knowing what I know now, I never would have made the choice I did. But I was in so much pain at that time and wanted to end the pain. I want you to know I love you and am grateful for all you did for me. Please forgive me and pray for me." Granting them your forgiveness through prayer can significantly aid their spiritual healing.

Reflecting on Lazarus's rising from the dead may be helpful. You will recall that Lazarus was a good friend of Jesus, along with his two sisters, Martha and Mary. Jesus finally arrived after Lazarus had already been dead for four days. He commands that the stone blocking the entrance to the tomb be opened. Then, Jesus cries out, "Lazarus, come out!" Upon his appearance from the tomb, Jesus commands, "Untie him and let him go free." Jesus is referring to the wrappings in which Lazarus had been bound as part of the burial rite.

Whomever we mourn who has ended their life, they are not the same person as when we knew them and the day their life ended. They have encountered the Divine Mercy of Jesus and his mother, Mary, whom we pray will be with us now and at the hour of our death. The love of God has embraced them so completely that they are no longer the same person. We have good reason to hope they are on their way to becoming free from their attachments to sin and readied to join the ranks of the Communion of Saints. That is why we can imagine them speaking as I do above.

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[3] *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches, "All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven" (1030).

[4] Salutary repentance encompasses interior repentance, which is a radical reorientation of one's life towards God. The word salutary is an adjective that refers to an experience that may seem difficult or unpleasant even though it is good for a person in the long run. Repentance is the act of turning away from sin and turning towards God. A genuine attitude of repentance includes, acknowledging one's sins, rejecting evil, and seeking reconciliation with God and the Church. Even at the moment of death, God can provide a person with the means to repent. Of course, a person is free to choose to accept or reject this final offer of God's grace and friendship.

Jesus' command to untie him applies to us left behind. We are to let go of our image of them when they took their life because they were so lost, distraught, confused, hurting, and desperate. They are no longer that person. We are to untie them, free them from that image, and not let it define them. We have good reason to hope they are being purified (purgatory) of any attachments to sin so that they will be worthy to enter God's presence. Remember, "*We should not despair of the eternal salvation of persons who have taken their own lives*."

That is Good News. They are not lost to us. We can legitimately expect (hope) to be reunited in the bliss of heaven where there will be no more suffering, no more pain, no more tears. That would be the direct result of God's mercy and forgiveness. We are to follow the Lord's lead, let go of the memory of how they died as the predominate one, and re-orientate our feelings, steering us to hope in the Lord.

Let me pause here to talk about depression, which is one of the leading causes of suicide, especially among youth. Depression can severely destroy a person's ability to think clearly and cause them to act in ways they would never have considered under normal circumstances. It calls into question a person's freedom to make an informed and thoughtful decision of this magnitude. People who are severely depressed want to end their pain and be with God in heaven, where there will be no more suffering. Taking their life is a sign of desperation, not an act of defiance. Our Lord would not encourage us to be hopeful unless there were good reasons for being so. The psalmist captures the confidence that should accompany our prayers in the words, "O Israel, hope in the Lord; for with the Lord there is loving kindness, and with him is abundant redemption" (Psalm 130:7).

Depression is an illness that attacks us mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and physically. People who are depressed often ignore it, thinking it will eventually go away. Left untreated, depression can end up manifesting in tragic ways, including someone choosing to end their life. If we take this point to the extreme, Fr. Alar, MIC suggests many cases can therefore be considered 'death by depression' rather than 'death by suicide.'"[5]

We have solid reasons to hope that all is not lost when someone takes their life. Fr. Ron Rolheiser, OMI, helps us to understand why we can hope for those who have succumbed to suicide: 'We can be overpowered, and some people are, but that's not despair[6] … Beyond mental illness, we can be defeated in life by many other things. Tragedy, heartbreaking loss, unrequited obsession, and crippling shame can, at times, break a heart, crush a will, kill a spirit, and bring death to a body. And our judgment on this should reflect our understanding of God: *What all-loving, merciful God would condemn someone because he or she … could not weather the storm? Does God side with our own narrow notions where salvation is mostly reserved for the strong? Not if Jesus is to be believed.*'"[7]

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[5] Alar, Chris; Lewis, Jason. After Suicide: There's Hope for Them and for You (p. 50). Marian Press. Kindle Edition.

[6] *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches, "By despair, man ceases to hope for his personal salvation from God, for help in attaining it or for the forgiveness of his sins. Despair is contrary to God's goodness, to his justice — for the Lord is faithful to his promises — and to his mercy" (2091).

[7] Alar, Chris; Lewis, Jason. *After Suicide: There's Hope for Them and for You* (pp. 51-52). Marian Press. Kindle Edition.

That begs the question. How do our prayers today impact the moment when a person took their life and stood before Our Lord at their particular judgment? We will look at that question in the following reflection.

The Marist Way of Grieving a Loss from Suicide – Pray Constantly and with Hope

Part Three

"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."*

The Catechism of the Catholic Church, #2283

Before I begin, I want to recommend a book by Fr. Chris Alar, MIC[8] , and Fr. Jason Lewis, MIC, entitled *After Suicide: There's Hope for Them and for You*. Their experience of losing a loved one by suicide led them to explore the teachings of the Church and found in them hope for those who have taken their life and healing for those who are left behind. I draw heavily from this book for these reflections because they are theologically sound, uplifting, and hopeful.

The book references the private revelations of Jesus to a humble Polish nun, St. Faustina Kowalska, in the 1930s.[9] "The message of the Divine Mercy reaffirms that God loves all of us, that His mercy is greater than our sins so that we will call upon him with trust, receive his mercy, and let it flow through us to others. Thus, all will come to share His joy."[10] She recorded them in her diary.

Catholics are not obligated to accept the message of a private revelation. Before he became Pope Benedict the XVI, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was head of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith. He explained that ecclesiastical approval of a private revelation has three elements: the message contains nothing contrary to the faith or morals; it is lawful to make it public; and the faithful are authorized to accept it with prudence. It is a help that is offered but which does not oblige one to use.[11] Christians from

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[8] Marians of the Immaculate Conception

[9] *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, “Christian faith cannot accept "revelations" that claim to surpass or correct the Revelation of which Christ is the fulfillment, as is the case in certain non-Christian religions and also in certain recent sects which base themselves on such "revelations". (65)
"The Christian economy, therefore, since it is the new and definitive Covenant, will never pass away; and no new public revelation is to be expected before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ."[28] Yet even if Revelation is already complete, it has not been made completely explicit; it remains for Christian faith gradually to grasp its full significance over the course of the centuries.” (66)
“Throughout the ages, there have been so-called "private" revelations, some of which have been recognized by the authority of the Church. They do not belong, however, to the deposit of faith. It is not their role to improve or complete Christ's definitive Revelation, but to help live more fully by it in a certain period of history. Guided by the Magisterium of the Church, the *sensus fidelium* knows how to discern and welcome in these revelations whatever constitutes an authentic call of Christ or his saints to the Church.”
“Christian faith cannot accept "revelations" that claim to surpass or correct the Revelation of which Christ is the fulfillment, as is the case in certain non-Christian religions and also in certain recent sects which base themselves on such "revelations". (67)

[10] For more information about The Divine Mercy Message and Devotion: https://www.thedivinemercy.org/message#.

[11] For a more in-depth treatment of this topic, go to https://www.catholic.com/magazine/print-edition/revelation-public-and-private.

other Churches and ecclesial communions are welcome to read what follows and to interpret it within the context of their particular faith tradition.

Pope St. John Paul II had a great devotion to St. Faustina. He felt he was made Pope to institute the Feast of Divine Mercy. His happiest day as Pope was when he canonized St. Faustina in 2000. He died on Divine Mercy Sunday, the Second Sunday of Easter, after going to Confession and receiving Holy Communion. [12]

With the approval of Church authorities, one being a saint having served as Pope, Catholics can have confidence that the messages purportedly revealed by the Risen Christ in the private revelations to St. Faustina are not contrary to faith and morals and can be a source of help in living a life of faith. I believe those who mourn the loss of someone they knew and loved who took their life can benefit from the hope the private revelations to St. Faustina offer. In that spirit, I reference them, though individual prudence is still encouraged. Also, Fr. Colin wanted Marists, when considering which pastoral approach to follow, to choose the most merciful one that has the Church's approval. That is what I am doing here.

Drawing on the insights of Frs. Alar and Lewis, MIC, let us continue our reflection on *The Marist Way of Grieving a Loss from Suicide – Pray Constantly and with Hope* by turning our attention to the teaching of the Church, which instructs us to pray for those we know and love who have taken their lives. How do our prayers today impact when a person took their life, maybe decades ago?[13]

Fr. Alar, MIC, observes, "In Jeremiah 1:5, God says, 'Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you.' If God 'knew us' before we were even in the womb, couldn't one conclude that He also knew our prayers before we were in the womb? Yes, God is omniscient and has knowledge of every prayer we will ever make before we make it. He is also omnipotent, so He has the power to take those prayers into account and apply them to the past, present, or future — especially when they are for someone's salvation."[14]

Okay. If you will accept, if not fully understand, that our prayers in the present can assist the salvation of those in the past while they lay dying,[15] what do we specifically pray for? We ask God to be merciful and give the person the graces they need for salvation. The Church prays for a merciful judgment for ourselves and others so that we do not receive what we deserve if strict justice were to be applied. However, we do not presume God's mercy. We ask. God also respects our freedom. So, we must say yes

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[12] (9:22)

[13] There will be also a general or final judgment. Then, both the living and the dead will assemble at the second coming when Christ will come in glory. It will be a public event where the conduct and the rewards of each person will be made known not only to their own conscience but to the assembled world. The general judgment will reveal the providence of God, ensuring that justice prevails. Our questions about why the good may have suffered and the wicked prospered will be answered. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches, "We shall know the ultimate meaning of the whole work of creation and of the entire economy of salvation and understand the marvelous ways by which his Providence led everything towards its final end. The Last Judgment will reveal that God's justice triumphs over all the injustices committed by his creatures and that God's love is stronger than death (1040).

[14] Alar, Chris; Lewis, Jason. After Suicide: There's Hope for Them and for You (p. 199). Marian Press. Kindle Edition.

[15] The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches, "Death puts an end to human life as the time open to either accepting or rejecting the divine grace manifested in Christ. The New Testament speaks of judgment primarily in its aspect of the final encounter with Christ in his second coming, but also repeatedly affirms that each will be rewarded immediately after death in accordance with his works and faith." (1021) This is known as the particular judgment.

to the offer of Divine Mercy. Our prayers can help the person who is lost to us by suicide say, “Lord, have mercy.” How that happens remains known to God.

In the following reflection, we will delve into what it looks like to pray constantly and with hope.

The Marist Way of Grieving a Loss from Suicide – Pray Constantly and with Hope

Part Four

Continuing from where we left off in Part Three, Fr. Alar, MIC, observes, "Since God desires our salvation more than anything else, why would anyone doubt that he would allow our prayers to assist those we love? Why would Christ ask that we pray constantly if our prayers do not have the power to make a difference?"[16] We cannot do anything apart from him. That is why the Church, in her formal prayers, addresses them to the Father, in the Spirit, and concludes with "through Christ our Lord" or "in the name of Jesus."

Our prayers do not impose our will on Christ, but they conform our will to his. Any doubts or misgivings we may have about our Lord's willingness to be merciful, compassionate, and forgiving when a suicide has occurred must give way and allow our thinking and feelings to conform to his. It was Christ who said, "What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him" (Luke 11: 11-13).

We do not pray, doubting the mercy of God. We pray confidently, expecting (hoping) that God will be faithful to his promises to raise to everlasting life all who put their trust in the mercy of Christ. Like Christ, we wait for the deceased to say yes to his offer of mercy. That is the intention of our prayers for the dead, especially those who have taken their life because they were temporarily overwhelmed by mental illness, tragedy, heartbreaking loss, unrequited obsession (intrusive and distressing thoughts), and crippling shame.

To see what that looks like in "real-time," Fr. Alar, MIC, tells a story about Dorothy Day, the great American Catholic activist, journalist, and founder of the Catholic Worker Movement. "She wrote a column about her sorrow when, after her conversion to Catholicism, a son of a friend died by suicide. She spoke about this with Fr. Zachary, who worked with her at "the little Church of Fourteenth Street, Our Lady of Guadalupe, in New York City. She wanted to know how to pray for this young man. Here is his reply.

> *There is no time with God. All the prayers you will say in the future for this soul will coun*t. God has said, "Ask and ye shall receive." He has promised this. *If you keep asking for God's mercy for that soul, you can be sure your prayers are answered.* At the moment of death, when the soul is released from the down drag of the body, there is given a choice — "do you prefer darkness to light, evil to good, denial rather than assent?"[17]

St. Faustina describes God's generosity as being extraordinary.

> "I often communicate with persons who are dying and obtain the divine mercy for them. Oh, how great is the goodness of God, greater than we can understand. *There are moments, and there are*

[16] Alar, Chris; Lewis, Jason. After Suicide: There's Hope for Them and for You (p. 199). Marian Press. Kindle Edition.

[17] Alar, Chris; Lewis, Jason. After Suicide: There's Hope for Them and for You (pp. 202, 203). Marian Press. Kindle Edition.

mysteries of the divine mercy over which the heavens are astounded. Let our judgment of souls cease, for God's mercy upon them is extraordinary (1684)."[18]

Fr. Alar, MIC, comments, "Think about that. Angels and saints, principalities and powers, all of the heavens are astounded by the greatness of God's "extraordinary" mercy. This should give us great consolation and unquestionable hope. God's mercy is not only "greater than we can understand," but it is also beyond the comprehension of all the heavens."[19]

We see God's "extraordinary" mercy in action when the "good thief" who, as he was dying on the cross, asked Jesus for mercy and forgiveness. Both were granted without hesitation. That gives us an insight into the mind and heart of God and hope for those who regret their decision to take their life and ask for mercy and forgiveness at the last possible moment.

We can see that same eagerness of Christ to bestow his divine mercy in these instructions to St. Faustina, "Pray as much as you can for the dying. By your entreaties, you obtain trust in My mercy for them because they have the most need for trust and have it the least. Be assured that the *grace of eternal salvation for certain souls in their final moment depends on your prayer"* (1777).[20]

Ponder that. Our Lord makes himself dependent on our prayers. Why? God did not ask for our cooperation when we were created. However, he asks for our cooperation in our redemption and that of others. Our prayers help a person say yes to God's offer of forgiveness and trust in his mercy before they make a final decision to reject God and choose hell. Knowing that God's grace can flow through our prayers for them years later and be applied retroactively when they lay dying is a consolation and comfort that our faith provides. We should take full advantage of it even if how that happens remains a mystery while we are here on Earth.

Fr. Alar, MIC, references the *Diary of Saint Maria Faustina Ko*walska, where she records that Jesus visited a despairing person (soul) three times and gave the person (soul) three opportunities to accept him and his offer of Mercy. He concludes that we can infer that God comes to offer his saving mercy to every person in their final moment and not only to those who have taken their life. This grace emerges from the merciful Heart of Jesus and gives the person (soul) a special light by means of which the soul begins to understand God's effort, but conversion depends on its own will.[21] That is in line with the teaching of the Catechism, "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." (#2283)

We have an entire lifetime to avail ourselves of God's mercy. After we have died, meaning once the soul has separated from the body, the door to God's mercy is closed. The only door that remains open to us is the door to God's justice. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches. "**[**Each person] receives [their] eternal retribution in [their] immortal soul at the very moment of [their] death, in a particular judgment that refers their life to Christ: either entrance into the blessedness of heaven-through a purification or

[18] Alar, Chris; Lewis, Jason. After Suicide: There's Hope for Them and for You (p. 77). Marian Press. Kindle Edition.
[19] Alar, Chris; Lewis, Jason. After Suicide: There's Hope for Them and for You (p. 77). Marian Press. Kindle Edition.
[20] Alar, Chris; Lewis, Jason. After Suicide: There's Hope for Them and for You (pp. 77-78). Marian Press. Kindle Edition.
[21] Alar, Chris; Lewis, Jason. After Suicide: There's Hope for Them and for You (p. 63). Marian Press. Kindle Edition.

immediately, -- or immediate and everlasting damnation. At the evening of life, we shall be judged on our love" (1021).

Let's pause at that last sentence. Suppose a person who took their life was known to be giving, ***loving***, just, helpful, compassionate and involved in the Church. Now read this from the First Letter of St. Peter, "Above all, *maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins*" (1 Peter 4:8). Another reason to pray constantly and with hope.[22]

Those left behind also need the grace to trust in the Divine Mercy for themselves should guilt torment them. When all is said and done, let go and let God be God and do what God does best. Remember, God's mercy is greater than we can understand and beyond the comprehension of all the heavens! Pray that the person we know and love will ask for and say yes to God's offer of extraordinary mercy even as they lay dying. Our prayers can help them at that critical moment, which reduces the feeling of powerlessness that accompanies the loss of a loved one by suicide.

The last reflection will look at the role of Mary, the mother of Jesus, when praying for the dead.

[22] Confessing our sins in the Sacrament of Penance is a kind of "dress rehearsal" for when we will confess our sins at the particular judgment. Then, our life will pass before us and that review will include confessing (revealing) all our sins. Confessing them in this life is to our advantage given that the door to God's mercy becomes available to us as we enter through the door of the confessional to celebrate the Sacrament of Penance. Nor can they be held against us in the particular judgment since they have been forgiven. The Sacrament of Penance is where God's mercy is freely given while here on earth. Once we have died, when the soul separates from the body, the door of God's mercy will close and the door to God's justice will open and we will receive what we deserve.

The Marist Way of Grieving a Loss from Suicide – Pray Constantly and with Hope

Part Five

In this final reflection, I want to reference *The Marist Way of Praying the Salve Regina - Part One*, which explores the role of the Queen Mother in the ancient Near East. *Part Two* tells the story behind the composition of the hymn itself. I bring this to your attention because we sing the *Salve Regina* at important celebrations at Marist, such as the Baccalaureate Mass and school Masses. For that reason, I want to take a deeper look into its spiritual meaning and its relationship to asking Mary, the Queen Mother to Jesus, to intercede on behalf of those we love who have taken their lives in a moment of weakness and desperation.

Fr. Colin wanted Marists to think, judge, feel, and act like Mary in all things. The Queen Mother's role provides a key to unlocking and peering into the mind and heart of the mother of Jesus, and it can give us insight into how to "be Mary" in the way Fr. Colin envisioned.

Mary's Queenship is rooted in her being the mother of the Lord, thus making her the mother of the King of Kings. Her Queenship is closely linked to her glorification in body and soul beside her Son. This emphasizes her unique conformity to Jesus on earth and in heavenly glory. As the Mother of God, she shares in a limited and analogous way in the royal dignity of Jesus Christ due to her union with Him.

Dr. Scott Hahn, the Founder and President of the St. Paul Center, speaker, and teacher, points out that most nations in the ancient Near East were monarchies ruled by a king. You might be surprised to learn that the woman ordinarily honored as queen would have been the woman who was the mother of the king. When the queen mother entered the king's presence, the king would stand in respect, even bow to his queen mother, and then she would be seated in the place of honor next to him. The king's authority was never in doubt; he would honor her requests not because he was legally entitled to do it but out of filial love.

The role of the queen was to serve as an advocate on behalf of the people, especially the poor. She was the voice of mercy before the king. Mary, the Queen Mother, has been given that role by her son to intercede before him and the Father on behalf of humanity. Mary watches over her children, interceding for them, obtaining every grace and mercy needed during our pilgrimage in this world.

Through the intercessions of the Queen Mother of Jesus, Mary obeys her Son and Savior, who said, "Be assured that the *grace of eternal salvation for certain souls in their final moment depends on your p*rayer." Now, our best efforts to love will pale in comparison to the love Mary has for each of us. God always listens to love because God is love. If eternal salvation for certain souls in their final moments depends on our prayers said out of our love for them, then how much more efficacious are the prayers of Mary, the Queen Mother? Our Lord has delegated this role to her. We have a powerful advocate in Mary. It is best to take advantage of this grace.

In our emphasis on God's mercy, some may ask where God's justice comes into play. Perhaps now would be the time to reflect on God's mercy and its relationship to God's justice. We sinful human beings limit God's justice to the guilty being punished. However, God's justice is broader than that. It is ordered toward a person's salvation. The punishment for sin is secondary. The primary aspect of God's justice is mercy. "Do I find pleasure in the death of the wicked—oracle of the Lord GOD? Do I not rejoice when they turn from their evil way and live?" (Ezekiel 18:23).

God's justice is not limited to punishment or making satisfaction for our sins. It includes inviting sinners to contrition, conversion, repentance, and reconciliation; all are expressions of God's forgiveness and

mercy. God's justice encompasses the demand for what is due *and* the offer of mercy and forgiveness, reflecting His infinite love for all, with the only limitation being our rejection of God's offer of mercy. To speak of God's justice is to speak of God's mercy. To speak of God's mercy is to speak of God's justice. The two are intimately connected, with one blending into the other. That is why the Society of Mary is keenly interested in promoting justice and being an instrument of Divine Mercy. You can't have one without the other.

Fr. Colin, who wanted Marists to be instruments of Divine Mercy, saw the Sacrament of Penance as the privileged place where Marist priests could best reflect God's mercy. Fr. Justin Taylor, SM, wrote about this in his biography of Fr. Colin, *The Reluctant Founder*. "Speaking about the priest as confessor, Fr. Colin said, 'He takes the place of our Lord, so he must be kind, but he is a judge, so he must be just: he must hold the balance even.' However, the now mature and experienced priest believed, 'it must tilt a little on the side of mercy.' He concluded, 'Let us nonetheless go to the confessional at the same time with confidence in God.'"[23]

During the time of Fr. Colin, the priest as judge was the primary model for the confessor.[24] So, you can see that Fr. Colin was breaking away from an over-emphasis on the priest as judge, wanting to be sure that the penitent experienced the mercy of God.

The early Marists were missionaries to the rural areas of France, where instruction in the faith and the celebration of the sacraments had been neglected for many years. In the opening talk of the parish mission, Fr. Colin would describe the Marists as "'the instruments of God's mercies for you—indeed 'most unworthy instruments.' He emphasizes that they, too, are human, subject to the same weaknesses as his hearers and therefore 'knowing how far man's fragility can go.' So the people should have no fear or mistrust in revealing their own sins in the 'sacred tribunal of penance.'"[25]

So, when Marists speak about Divine Mercy, they acknowledge <u>their own need</u> for Divine Mercy. Having experienced the grace of God's mercy will make them all the more eager to be instruments of God's mercy.

As we have seen, Divine Justice will lead to conversion, contrition, forgiveness, repentance, and reconciliation, which are the expressions of Divine Mercy. Who would deny the need for instruments of Divine Mercy in our fractured and broken world? As we have already seen, one way we can be instruments of Divine Mercy is by praying for the dead, especially for those who have no one to pray for them, are most in need of our prayers, especially those who have taken their life. We should pray constantly and with hope. Our prayers should include having Masses said on their behalf. We are encouraged to place our prayers in the hands of Mary, the Queen Mother, to bring to her son.

That concludes my reflections on *The Marist Way of Grieving a Loss from Suicide – Pray Constantly and with Hope*. Let's conclude these reflections by doing that now and pray for that person, who, in a desperate cry for help, took their life. "Hail, Holy Queen, mother of mercy: our life, our sweetness, and our hope. To thee do we cry, poor banished children of Eve. To thee do we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping in this valley of tears. Turn then, most gracious advocate, your eyes of mercy toward us, and

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[23] Taylor, Justin. Jean-Claude Colin: Reluctant Founder 1790-1875 (p. 178). ATF Press. Kindle Edition.

[24] At that time, the confessor was to serve as a judge, who had to determine if the penitent was sufficiently sorrowful for their sins and given the appropriate penance.

[25] Taylor, Justin. Jean-Claude Colin: Reluctant Founder 1790-1875 (pp. 334-335). ATF Press. Kindle Edition.

after this, our exile, show unto us the blessed fruit of thy womb, Jesus. O Clement, O loving, O sweet, Virgin Mary. Amen."

Mary, Seat of Wisdom, pray for us.