

# Suicide has long-lasting effects

BY NANCY FRAZIER O'BRIEN

WASHINGTON (CNS) — Suicide has long-lasting and traumatic effects that go far beyond the person who dies, as an Oct. 20 Web-based discussion among a priest, a bereavement counselor and a psychiatrist showed.

Oblate Father Ron Rolheiser, president of the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio, said the "soul-scarring experience" of the suicide of a 22-year-old neighbor when he was 14 is "the reason I am a priest today."

"I didn't know him that well, I didn't talk about it with anyone, but it changed my life," he said, adding that much of his life has been spent "trying to make sense of a suicide when I was 14 years old."

Claire Woodruff, religious education coordinator in the Archdiocese of Portland, Ore., and the facilitator of a Suicide Bereavement Support group, spoke about the suicide 14 years ago of her husband of nearly 23 years, Ken, whose "battle with clinical depression was short but very, very intense."

After Ken died, her family felt "God's love pouring into our lives" through family and friends, Woodruff said, but "the old Claire was long gone, and I didn't know how to articulate that" to them.

Dr. Thomas Welch, a Portland psychiatrist who moderated the discussion, said teens, young

adults and elderly white men are most likely to die by suicide, although "the demographics are changing" and the suicide rate is increasing among middle-aged women.

The three were participating in a Webinar on suicide prevention and pastoral supports, sponsored by the National Catholic Partnership on Disability's Council on Mental Illness and other groups. They were joined in the interactive session by people at more than 100 sites around the country.

Calling suicide "the ultimate taboo" because it conflicts with the "most powerful" human instinct to preserve life, Father Rolheiser said he believes that "in most suicides, the person dies against his or her own will."

He said most suicide-prone people have "souls too bruised to touch" and are afflicted with something like "emotional cancer or emotional stroke or emotional heart disease."

Death by suicide "is akin to someone whose clothing is on fire and who jumps out of a building to end the pain but does not realize that it will also end his life," the priest said.

Father Rolheiser also reviewed church teaching on suicide, noting that the Catechism of the Catholic Church describes it as a grave wrong but says, "We should not despair of the eternal salvation of persons who have taken their own lives."

Although earlier church documents said those who died by

suicide should not receive a church funeral, the latest catechism is "glaring by its omission" of any such reference, the priest said.

Woodruff recounted the still-painful story of her husband's suicide and its "psychological devastation" on herself and her children. She said she found that the grieving process "takes longer than most people think it should."

She said he had been diagnosed with clinical depression only three months before his death and had begun to show "glimpses of his old self" after six weeks of hospitalization and several sessions of electroshock therapy. "We will never know why he relapsed," she said.

Welch said family members and friends of those who die by suicide often feel there is something they could have done to prevent the death.

But, he said, "some people with mental illness, despite optimal care, die suddenly of their illness, not unlike people with heart disease or cancer."

"Death by suicide is not predictable, but might be preventable," Welch added.

Woodruff, who has since remarried, said she never uses the phrase "committed suicide" in reference to her first husband's death because it implies "a criminal action or a sin."

"You commit a crime, you commit adultery," she said. "That continues to feed the image that suicide is a sin and a crime."

# Is there a way to legally document my preferences for my funeral services?

Indiana lawmakers have established a new way to remove some of the uncertainty, and perhaps some disagreements, regarding the funeral arrangement process with the passage of Indiana's Funeral Planning Declaration statutes. Effective July 1, 2009, this law provides a vehicle for any competent person 18 years of age or older to designate a family member, friend or other, trusted individual as the person who is authorized to carry out funeral wishes specified in the declarant's Funeral Planning Declaration. The full text of the new law, which includes a Funeral Planning Declaration form, can be viewed at [www.in.gov/legislative/ic/code/title29/ar2/ch19.html](http://www.in.gov/legislative/ic/code/title29/ar2/ch19.html).

A Funeral Planning Declaration could be invaluable as a means of assuring a declarant that his/her desired funeral ceremony and burial preferences will be carried out after the declarant's death. After all, a Catholic's end of life worship preferences are no less important or meaningful than those undertaken during life.

The new law provides that a Funeral Planning Declaration must be separate from a will, power of attorney or similar document. It is a stand alone document and takes precedence over certain other documents concerning decision making on the disposition of the declarant's body after death; the disposition of the declarant's remains; the provision of funeral services for the declarant; religious ceremonies to be performed after the declarant's death; the casket, urn or other merchandise necessary for the disposition of the declarant's body after death; direction of

funeral arrangements; and, grave memorials. The declarant designates the individual who is authorized to carry out the declarant's preferences on such items, or who is entrusted to make those decisions on behalf of the declarant after the declarant's death if no preference is provided. Either way, the new law presents a means to take guesswork out of who is authorized to direct the funeral planning process and gives a declarant some level of assurance that his/her religious preferences will be honored after death. If the declarant has a change of heart after making a valid Funeral Planning Declaration, the document can be destroyed, rendering it invalid, and another can be executed.

A declarant's ability to have preferences that are designated in a Funeral Planning Declaration carried out as requested could be limited by such things as the declarant's financial resources at the time of death or contractual agreements, such as a prepaid plan with a funeral home. You should consult a priest to determine the suitability of liturgy preferences. If you are interested in a Funeral Planning Declaration, coordinate it with your other estate plans and talk with priest to avoid roadblocks to having your preferences carried out after your death.

**This information** is not intended to be legal advice. Consult with an attorney to review all of the details and the requirements for making a valid Funeral Planning Declaration.

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