

Suicide and '13 Reasons Why'

-Bishop Timothy L. Doherty

Editor's note: In this week's column, Bishop Doherty responds to a very real and present concern for the parishioners of our diocese and our friends across the nation — teen suicide. Typically, at this time of the year, the bishop would be tailoring his column to address Mother's Day, which is Sunday, May 14. Time is crucial and dialogue is critical as we seek to respond (from a faith-based perspective) to the subject matter ensued by a controversial television show that has captured the interest of our youth.

The media company Netflix recently released the video version of "13 Reasons Why" based on a 2007 book. The 17-year-old narrator leaves behind cassette recordings addressed to the people whom she names or blames as contributing somehow to her suicide.

This video phenomenon has gotten the attention of youth, parents and educators. And mental health workers. The reasons are many: young people are binge watching (viewing 13 episodes in one sitting) apart from adult or professional guidance. Youth can be very suggestible, and some professionals are worried about copy-cat behaviors. There is concern that many young people, for all their considerable intelligence, lack a stabilizing outlook that life-tested values provide. And because this series is gathering so many viewers, there are plans to produce "a second season" of this show.

Sadly, any series about suicide these days goes out to audiences which very likely lack a foundation in religion or ethics. I think about the cardinal virtues underlined in our Catholic Catechism: justice, temperance, prudence and fortitude. These were revered among even the pagans before Christ, so they cannot be dismissed as "just more church stuff." They enable a nobility of thoughts and actions.

There are some good ethics and therapeutics resources to aid our knowledge and communications about suicide. These URL links appear within "Bishop Doherty's Columns" on our diocesan Web site.

The Catholic News Agency provides a report at:

<http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/catholic-leaders-urge-extreme-caution-for-new-netflix-series-31586/>

The National Association of School Psychologists analyzes "13 Reasons Why" with guides for discussion and assistance strategies: <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/school-safety-and-crisis/preventing-youth-suicide/13-reasons-why-netflix-series-considerations-for-educators>

Many of the resources address mental health concerns, and they should. There are marvelous aids available, but none as important as maintaining an active, ongoing conversation with young people. At the same time, we can help our youth understand that the whole topic of suicide is not the privileged territory of the young or the property of 21st-century youth. We share much across

generations, from graces to anxieties to temptations. What differs greatly are cultures, family structures and the pervasive media that are in every pocket and backpack.

I was 6 or 7 when my father related one of his childhood memories about a man found hanging in the basement of a neighboring house. We were in a car as we drove past the place. I heard Dad against a backdrop of the Great Depression and World War II which even then had contoured my young awareness. Our conversation might not translate across 60 years and a changed culture, but Dad gently signaled that bravery (fortitude) must suffuse any human life. I also got the message that the subject of suicide, once raised, would not be off limits in our future conversations. Other parents and other families have their own stories.

In her 1934 essay “Letter to a Parish Priest,” Nobel Laureate author Sigrid Undset notes how the “cultural values, moral ideas, (and) emotional wealth” of European culture required the Christian underpinnings which the Catholic religion had brought. A healthy conversation on our topic requires the same foundations. Undset’s essay, still in print in her book “Stages on the Road,” advises the priest about his funerals for suicides. Avoid saying that the deceased was not in his/her right mind because it will plant a seed of doubt in survivors. Was she not in her right mind the last time she told me she loved me? Even when we mean a kindness, another’s tragedy does not grant us a license to assume another’s state of mind.

Catholic Christians rely on a foundation that is hard to imagine being without. We know who we are (creatures of God, children of God) and where we are (residing in God’s creation of the world). All of creation, not just humanity, sings of these foundations. The Book of Psalms ends with this acclamation: “Let everything that lives and that breathes give praise to the Lord.” These affirmations provide a basis for meaning and for hope, making it very important to transmit these facts to our smallest children.

The challenge is to avoid the confusion of our caring listening to suicide- thoughts with moral neutrality or approval. Our standing is convincing if we are consistent in our relationships. As one mentor of mine would say, we have to understand, yet stand for the good at the same time.