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THE CATHOLIC TRADITION AND ITS TREATMENT OF SUICIDE

*A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Theology in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the Degree of STL.*

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To all:

*Encompass'd with a thousand dangers,
Weary, faint, trembling with a thousand terrors
I ... in a fleshly tomb, am
Buried above ground.*

William Cowper.

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General Introduction.

We have seen in recent years how suicide has become a more pressing reality as a social phenomenon. With this has come a vast amount of data and information as regards its cause, and the means by which its prevention might be sought. The following are an example of such:

- Male suicide rates are four times higher than female rates.
- Suicide rates increase with age and are highest among males over twenty-five.
- Suicide attempt rates are three times higher for females than for males.
- An estimated five million living Americans have tried to kill themselves.
- 30,000 people kill themselves every year in the United States.
- The risk of death from suicide is greater than if there were a fully loaded jumbo jet air disaster every four days.

The list of statistics and details be they, sociological or psychological are endless. This abundance of information has brought about the development of a complex web of distinctions and clarifications in the language of psychology and sociology, which have in part made their way into popular perceptions. A similar type of development has occurred within the Church due in part from the insights gained from these sciences but the difference being that this new vocabulary of subtle clarifications within the science of theology has not found root within the faithful. The church is still seen to operate with the blunt instruments of right and wrong. In short the church teaching on the subject of suicide is perceived, as "Suicide is a mortal sin." This is not seen as a summary but the

whole story. This idea hides, the more fruitful and hope filled insights which the Church now holds in regard to suicide.

The teaching of the Church on any subject is base on “sacred Tradition, sacred Scripture and the Magisterium of the Church all are so connected and associated that one of them cannot stand without the others.”¹ This is also true of suicide, to understand the current position one needs to see where and what it has grown out of. The tradition has shaped its current form, the scriptures have guided the path taken, and the Magisterium has proclaimed this truth. The stages we will look at are the early church and patristic era, the period running up to the Vatican council and finally the second Vatican council and its influence on the subject of suicide.

In the Patristic era we will note how suicide became an issue for the Church fathers. Faced by the immediate threat of a blurring of the boundaries between martyrdom and suicide clarity was needed. This clarity was achieved and suicide was seen as morally wrong. With time this would be codified and become part of official teaching.

In the pre Vatican period we see this need for clarity continued if in a more organised fashion. Fundamental moral was employed not so much to help people to live the moral live but as a means to dispelling any grey areas. This was further maintained by the question and answer style of the catechism. All the while it was supported by the code of canon law.

¹ Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, chapter 2 sec.10, 18 November, 1965 found in Flannery, A., *Vatican council the conciliar and post conciliar documents*, (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1987).

With the second Vatican council we see the church invite herself to encounter the modern world and interact with it. This *aggiornamento*, which Pope John XXIII had called for brought it own challenges but also great riches. As morality gained insight from disciplines like psychology we see blunt distinctions between right and wrong needing deeper reflection before judgements could be pronounced. Morality while holding onto what is objectively wrong slowly made room for the broken reality of the human condition and tried to take on board the subjective elements in its appraisal of a situation.

We will journey through these developments plotting the changes and to try and discover where we stand today in regard to suicide and Church teaching. This is important for a number of reasons. Firstly, because it is the western-Christian view on this subject which has influenced more than any the legal, psychological, and sociological views on suicide even in culturally diverse areas. Secondly, as a Church we have been to the forefront in the prohibition of suicide. Thirdly, to appreciate any Church teaching we must view it from its conception to see what it was fed on, through its growth to see what it was supported by and hence see will it survive on today's stable diet where we try to couple faith and reason in reaching our conclusion.

Chapter 1: The treatment of Suicide in the Early Church and the Patristic era.

In its early years the church faced many difficulties both from within, as she tried to define her self, and from without as others tried to suppress her in the persecutions. One reality, which was evident or expressed itself in both cases, was the issue of suicide. Be it suicide on the part of the Christian virgins as an attempt to escape defilement during the persecutions, or as a practice of some sect in schism, and their false understanding of the faith, and what it demanded. Even in this early period suicide was a reality for the early church and one, which is expressed in the writings of the Fathers, and in the codes of different Church councils. We will see that different writers approached the problem differently due to the different circumstances to which they were writing, but the end result was a unified prohibition against suicide.

1.1. Lactantius:

In the words of Jurgens, Lactantius was an “African by birth, a rhetorician by profession, and a Christian by conversion.”² The most important of his Christian works is the *Divine Institutes*, a seven-part work with the double purpose of “refuting paganism and setting forth the true doctrine”. In it he deals with many aspects of the Christian life but the section with direct reference to this study is *The Divine Institutes Book III*.³ In chapter 18 of this book he addresses the problem of suicide while arguing against the Pythagoreans and the Stoics who in his view “while holding the immortality of the soul, foolishly persuade a voluntary death.”⁴ He does excuse them to some degree as they have in his

² Jurgens, W.A., *The Faith of the Early Fathers Vol. I.*, (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1970), p. 264.

³ W. Fletcher (tr.), *The works of Lactantius, vol. I.*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1871), p. 182. also found in PL 6, 405-408 Lactantius, *Divin. Institu III, 18*.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

view been blinded by their philosophy, but they are still culpable since they adopted a falsehood of their own philosophy, which did not grasp the truth of human nature and its relationship to the soul. This enabled them to conclude that suicide was allowed. But for Lactantius this could not be the case in fact he claimed:

Nothing can be more wicked than this. For if a homicide is guilty because he is a destroyer of man, he who puts himself to death is under the same guilt, because he puts to death a man, Yea, that crime may be considered to be greater, the punishment of which belongs to God alone. For as we did not come into this life of our own accord; so, on the other hand, we can only withdraw from this habitation of the body which has been appointed for us to keep, by the command of Him who placed us in this body that we may inhabit it, until He orders us to depart from it ... All these philosophisers, therefore were homicides.⁵

Like much apologetical writing the leaders are targeted⁶ with special reference made to Democritus, who, “By his own spontaneous act, he offered up his head to death” which he claims, “nothing can be more wicked than this.”⁷ In a later abridgment of the *Divine Institutes* called the *Epitome* he again addresses the issue of suicide and adds that those who commit suicide are not only homicides but impious as well.

Lactantius sees no truth in the advice given by Terence⁸, to a young man who was going to bring his life to an end as a result of his plans for life been checked. Terence advised him; “First, learn in what life consists; then, if you shall be dissatisfied with life, have recourse to death.” For Lactantius this is an overstepping of the authority given to

⁵ Amundsen, D.A., “Suicide and Early Christian Values” p. 118 found in Brody, B.A., *Suicide and Euthanasia, historical and contemporary themes*, (London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), p.77-155.

⁶ Included in his list is Cleanthes, a Stoic who died due to his refusal to take food; Chrysippus who died from either an excessive draught of wine or from excessive laughter; Zeno the chief of the stoic sect who died from suffocation; Empedocles and Democritus of whom various accounts in respect of their deaths are given.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

⁸ Originally found in *Heautontim.* v. 2.18.

humanity. The people who hold these philosophies in his view see the “bright light”, as he calls it with their eyes but their minds are blind, in short they see but do not believe. This brings him to the conclusion that all these philosophers⁹ are therefore “homicides”.

An example of a more specific case study by Lactantius is seen in his treatment of Cicero¹⁰ who claimed:

We may congratulate ourselves since death is about to bring either a better state than that which exists in life or at any rate not a worse one. For if the soul is in a state of vigour without the body, it is a divine life; and if it is without perception, assuredly there is no evil.¹¹

Here we see a shift in the analysis, away from the act to that which will be the end result. For Lactantius this is a clever shift in the argument as now Cicero has moved the debate away from the current reality and placed the end as the point of judgement as to whether an act is good or not. Coupled with this, no longer would the character of death be a result of the life lived. “For as life itself is a good if it is passed virtuously, but evil if it is spent viciously, so also death is to be weighed in accordance with the past actions of life.”¹²

⁹ Here he adds to his list Cato and Cleombrotus of Ambricia who having read Plato on the immortality of the soul took their own lives or as he states “this great crime”. Due to this he claims that Plato’s doctrine is one to be “altogether detestable and to be avoided, if it drives men from life.”

¹⁰ This he does in Book III chapter XIX.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p 186.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.186.

Lactantius saw that the sovereignty of God over life and death was being rejected, the means of ones death, was being separated from the nature of the life lived, and the reality of a judgement in the Christian sense was being denied. These truths, were at worst being denied and at best ignored.

1.2. St John Chrysostom

He is writing against a school of thought, which promoted a line of thinking which advocated “the advent of eternal life through deciding to end one’s present life.”¹³ Chrysostom, working out of a Christian school of thought argued that we must go through the natural course in passing from this world to the next. Again he stressed the fact that it is under God’s authority that we pass from this life to the next, and we cannot act against the will of God.¹⁴ For Chrysostom “None can harm him who does not injure Himself.”¹⁵

Using the tools of virtue ethics he claimed that if we are a people of virtue then we will be capable of standing against the trials of life. To illustrate his point he compares the case of Judas to that of Peter, both called, both tested, both given the same graces and instruction, and if anything Judas having an advantage (what this added advantage is he

¹³ Blazque, N., “The Church’s Traditional moral Teaching on Suicide”, *Concilium*, 179, (Edinburg: T&T Clarke, 1985), p. 67.

¹⁴ See St. John Chrysostom *De consolatione mortis* in PG 56, p. 299.

¹⁵ Schaff, P., (ed.), *The Nicene and Post- Nicene Fathers Vol. IX*, “St Chrysostom: on the priesthood; ascetic treatises; selected homilies and letters; homilies on the statues”, (Michigan: W.M. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1968), p.270.

does not state) yet he was the one who betrayed Jesus and the one who took his life. For him it is not:

Stress of circumstances, nor variation of seasons, nor insults of men in power, nor a crowd of calamities, nor variations in seasons, nor insults of men in power, nor intrigues besetting thee like snowstorms, nor a crowd of calamities, nor a promiscuous collection of all the ills to which mankind is subject, which can disturb even slightly the man who is brave, and temperate, and watchful; just as on the contrary the indolent and spine man who is his own contrary or the indolent and supine man who is his own betrayer cannot be made better, even with the aid of innumerable ministrations.¹⁶

Now we see a distinction and judgement being made on those who do take their lives. It is the person, not the trials per say which brings their downfall.¹⁷ It also makes a further judgement in that people who commit suicide must not have been living a life of virtue but of vice. Taken a step further, suicide as an act of vice could be seen as a reflection of a life vice. This leaves us with a double issue with regard to the issue of repentance and forgiveness, firstly in regard to the life lived and secondly with regard to the act of suicide itself.

Where does this leave the martyrs who in the face of trials seem to give up their lives willingly? Was the church making an exception permitting a type of religious suicide, that of St Pelagia, for example? St John Chrysostom clarifies this point in his homilies on the issue of Christian martyrdom. He makes the important distinction between suicide and the giving of ones life “*nutu divino*”¹⁸, that is in response to a divine call or inspiration. In the case of one being inspire or called by God it would not be suicide but

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 279.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 375, This point is touched off again in Homily V concerning the statues.

¹⁸ The commanded will of God.

an obedient response to the will of God the author of all life who has the authority to make such demands. Given this view the martyrs differed in that their action was not “a proud decision over one’s life in the Stoic manner”¹⁹ but an obedient witnessing and following of the will of God.

In his *Commentary on the Galatians* he does comment on those who are in heresy and who regard the material life as evil and hence to be fled from. These people go against the wishes of Jesus when he said to his Father:

And these are in the world, and I come to Thee; I pray not that Thou should take them from the world, but that Thou should keep them from evil, i.e. sin. Further, those who will not allow this, but insist that the present life is evil, should not blame those who destroy themselves; for as he who withdraws himself from evil is not blamed, but deemed worthy of a crown, so he who withdraws himself from evil is not blamed but deemed worthy of a crown, so he who by a violent death, by hanging or otherwise, puts an end to his life, ought not to be condemned. Whereas God punishes such men more than murders, and we all regard them with horror, and justly; for if it is base to destroy others, much more is it to destroy one’s self.²⁰

For Chrysostom, when suicide was taken as an option to escape the difficulties of life, or as an option taken because one was a disciple of a heretical philosophy or in the case of the martyrs he deems that it is wrong and to be avoided by the Christian as an option as it is against our faith and carries with it the judgement of our Father in heaven who prohibits suicide as an action.

¹⁹ Blazque, N., “The Church’s Traditional moral Teaching on Suicide”, *Concilium*, 179, (Edinburg: T&T Clarke, 1985), p.67.

²⁰ Amundsen, D.A., “Suicide and Early Christian Values”, p. 119 found in Brody, B.A., *Suicide and Euthanasia, historical and contemporary themes*, (London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), p.77-155.

1.3. St Ambrose.

The issue of the distinction between suicide and martyrdom was an issue in many parts of the church and one which Ambrose had to face in Milan in relation to the virgins who took their lives rather than have themselves violated.²¹

In his church but also in his family there was a tradition of virgins, most immediately with his sister but also with a virgin martyr called Soteris who was a relation of his.²² The pressing question for these devout women was, should a virgin give up her life so as to maintain her vows and her chastity? He deals with the issue by taking examples of virgins in the tradition who, did give up their lives for the sake of their purity and their vows.

In chapter II of his *Letter to Marcellina his sister*,²³ we see him talk of Agnes, who at the tender age of eleven gave witness by her martyrdom. He describes in a most emotional way how she “was fearless under the cruel hands of the executioners, she was unmoved by the heavy weight of the creaking chains, offering her whole body to the sword of the raging soldiers, as yet ignorant of death but ready for it.”²⁴

²¹ St Ambrose, *Nicean and Post Nicean Fathers, series II, Vol. X*, “St. Ambrose selected works and titles”, (Michigan: W.M. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969), p.270, It is also found in St. Ambrose, *De virginibus III*, 7, in PL 16, 241-243.

²² Moorhead, J., *Ambrose: Church and Society in the Late Roman world*, (London: Longman, 1999), p. 53

²³ Schaff and Henery (Ed.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, “Book I of St Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, concerning virgins, to Marcellina his sister”, (Michigan: W.M. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1968), p. 364.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.364.

To illustrate his point he attempts to reconstruct her final conversation before her death:

It would be an injury to my spouse to look on anyone as likely to please me. He who chose me first for Himself shall receive me. Why are you delaying, executioner? Let this body perish which can be loved by eyes which I would not.²⁵

According to this account she prayed and then laid her neck out for the executioner. Such was her courage that the executioner trembled for the peril of another and it was he who looked the one accused as she lost her life. For Ambrose this was not suicide as he states, Agnes “who as yet could not, because of her age, dispose of herself. And she brought it to pass that she should be believed concerning God, whose evidence concerning man would not be accepted. For that which is beyond nature is from the Author of nature.”²⁶ Her apparent eagerness for death was not a rejection of life but an acceptance of Jesus her spouse.

The practice of virgins giving up their lives must have been an issue for Ambrose’s church as he revisits the issue in Book III. Here we see a slight difference as in this case he addresses the issue of those who take their lives in order to escape violence.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 364.

²⁶ Schaff and Henery (Ed.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, “St Ambrose selected works and letters” (Michigan: W.M. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969), p. 387. (St. Ambrose, *Letter to Marcellina his sister*, chapter II, 8.).

He opens by outlining what he sees as a difficulty:

One ought to think of the merits of those who have cast themselves down from a height, or have drowned themselves in a river, lest they should fall into the hands of persecutors, seeing that holy scripture forbids a Christian to lay hands on himself.²⁷

To this complex question he sees a plain answer in the example of Saint Pelagia, who was a martyr. He gives an account of how this fifteen-year-old girl in the absence of her mother and sisters and in the face of the persecutors, being filled with God gave up her life rather than loose her faith and virginity. He seems to quote what she might have said:

I both wish and fear to die, for I meet not death but seek it. Let us die if we are allowed, or if they will not allow it, still let us die. God is not offended by a remedy against evil, and faith permits the act. In truth, if we think of the real meaning of the word how can what is voluntary be violence? It is rather violence to wish to die and not to be able. And we do not fear this difficulty. For who is there who wishes to die and is not able to do so, when there are so many easy ways to death? For I can now rush upon the sacrilegious altars and overthrow them, and quench with my blood the kindled fires. I am not afraid that my right hand may fail to deliver the blow, or that my breast may shrink from the pain. I shall leave no sin to my flesh. I fear not that a sword will be wanting, I can die by my own weapons, I can die without the help of an executioner, in my mothers bosom.²⁸

We can see in this seeds of doubt in the opening section but this is out weighted by what is the core of her defence, purity of body mind and soul for the sake of God her spouse. The idea of her dying for her spouse is reinforced by her supposed dress, she adorned her head and but on a bridal dress as if going to meet the bridegroom Christ. Moorhead points and there is some weight in the opinion that such an could be seen as suicide.

²⁷ Schaff and Henery (Ed.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, (Michigan: W.M. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1968), p. 387. (St Ambrose, *To Marcellina his sister concerning virgins*, Book III, Ch. VII).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.387.

For the church and in the thought of Ambrose it was seen as service to God. For Ambrose “when the chance of praiseworthy death offered itself it should be snatched.”²⁹

In his *Letters to Priests* he quotes Agnes as saying:

I die willingly, no one will lay a hand on me, no one will harm my virginity with his shameless glance, I shall take with me my purity and my modesty unsullied. These robbers will have no reward for their brazenness. Pelagia will follow Christ, no one will take away her freedom, and nobody will see her freedom of faith taken away, nor her remarkable purity, the product of wisdom. That which is servile will remain here, bound for no use.³⁰

Which is the greater good one’s life or one’s chastity? He goes on to cite how her mother and her sister take a similar part, by drowning in a river to avoid the persecutors. In his description of how her mother and sisters lives ended we see the same eagerness and urgency is expressed when he claims that “no one drew back, no one ceased to go on, no one tried where to place her steps, they were anxious only when they felt the ground, grieved when the water was shallow, and glad when it was deep.”³¹ He finishes by drawing reference to one of their own, Sotheris who underwent many sufferings and in the end she found what he calls “the sword which she desired.”³² All seem to take their lives in a fashion which points towards suicide yet it being inspired by faith seems to relieve both the charge and the penalty.

²⁹ Moorhead, J., *Ambrose: Church and Society in the Late Roman world*, (London: Longman, 1999), p.134.

³⁰ R.J., Deferrari, (ed.), *The Fathers of the Church, Saint Ambrose letters*, (Washington: The Catholic University of America, 1954), p. 301.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 387.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 387.

Ambrose could be read as allowing one to take ones life rather than suffer oneself being violated. To claim this as blanket appraisal of Ambrose's opinion would be unjust. For Ambrose in his exegetical work on Maccabees does express some concern on behalf of the mother of the seven boys who it would appear took her own life:³³

Who would say that she was not happy? As if fortified with seven walls she stood among the bodies of her sons and felt no onslaught of death. Who I ask, would be in doubt about her happiness? ... As if surrounded by seven turrets, she lifted up her head into the dwelling place of paradise. Encircled by her seven sons, she brought to the heavenly altar a choir most holy to God, and melodious not alone with its voices put also with its sufferings, to sing the praise of God.³⁴

Concern is expressed in regard to the fact that the events which surround her may have brought on what he calls the "onslaught of death" yet he does not withhold the possibility of her entering the heavenly court to praise God. When passing concerns are expressed they are overshadowed by what he sees these people inheriting in the next life. While he seems to give exception to these women virgins in the final analysis he sees suicide as wrong and his last point of defence is scripture. According to Amundsen this is the earliest blanket appeal to Scripture for a condemnation of suicide.

1.4. Eusebius

A look at Eusebius' history would give us a feel for both the society and the church at this time. We see that the practice of people taking their lives was a reality in the early church as he gives space to a number of incidents of people who in the face of the persecutions took their lives rather than give way to the evil which was to be acted on them.

³³Peebles, B.M., *The Fathers of the Church Vol. 65: St Ambrose, Seven exegetical works*, (Washington: The Catholic university of America Press, 1972), p. 180. Also found in *St. Ambrose Iac. 2.11.53*).

³⁴*Ibid.*, p.181.

As with some of the other commentators we see in Eusebius' writings mixed views on the subject to the point that at times he seem to agree with their action. His first case is that of an aged Apollonia, who after being and tortured was threatened with death if she did not give into the impious suggestions of her torturer. She asked for leave so as to think about it but "as soon as she was left alone, threw herself with a great leap into the flames, which completely consumed her."³⁵ When talking about the persecutions of the Christians of Nicomedia he claimed "A tradition tells that at that time many men and women jumped of their own accord into the fire with unspeakable divine fervour."³⁶ There was also the persecuted Christian in Egypt who "bravely held their heads out to those who cut them off" reciprocated this type of practice.³⁷

He also gives the account of a woman of high standing in Antioch who had two daughters who were much sought after and so she concealed them from social circles to protect them. He tells how these girls were lured back to Antioch falsely and captured by the awaiting soldiers. On the event of their capture the mother advised her daughters, "to surrender their souls to the slavery of demons was worse than all deaths and destruction; and she set before them the only deliverance from all these things, - escape to Christ." He accounts how they casts themselves into a river and "thus they destroyed themselves."³⁸ There seems to be no disapproval of their action on the part of Eusebius.

³⁵ Schaff and Henery (Ed.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Vol. I, Eusebius church history life of Constantine, oration in praise of Constantine*, (Michigan: W.M. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1968), p. 318.

(Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica*, VI,41,7.)

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 322. (Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica*, VIII, 6,6.)

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 326. (Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica*, VIII, 8)

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 332-333, (Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica*, VIII, 12)

Again it seem very close to suicide yet in the church at this time it was not seen as such. It was regarded as service to a life of virtue and hence serving God.

Again we see another example of the wife of one of the prefects of Rome who was a Christian and who, when under threat of being violated asked for leave to prepare herself. She went to her room and:

Being alone, stabbed herself with a sword ... and by her deeds, more powerfully than by any words, she has shown to all men now and hereafter that the virtue which prevails among Christians is the only invincible and indestructible possession.³⁹

Again no condemnation of the act, if anything he seems to approve. The fear of breaking ones chastity and committing adultery seems to justify the act. His approval of these acts of suicides is due to the fact that they were undertaken under the duress of great provocation. The idea that they were following the inspiration of God is not born out too clearly. The most immediate factor for consideration was the protection of their chastity and to a lesser degree fear of the future consequences.

While the Christian condemnation of suicide differed from that of the mainstream philosophies and in particular from the Stoics there was at times a blurred understanding between suicide and martyrdom. This confusion expresses itself in two cases in particular. Firstly in the case of those who seem to rush towards martyrdom and those who as it were took a pre-emptive strike by taking there lives prior to an evil being carried out on them as seen in the writings of Eusebius.

³⁹*Ibid.*, p. 337

Here the community through its writings seems to extol them even though at times it seems a needless sacrifice of ones life.

This could be explained by the fact that Eusebius' examples are all taken from the oral tradition. He introduced them to the written tradition, and by the later commenting by the Fathers they gain permanence of position. Blazquez explains that this could explain what on the face of it looks like a contradiction in the belief of the Christian community on the subject of suicide. He claims, "What can be difficult to understand on the academic theological level can more easily be grasped on the level of popular faith."⁴⁰ Hence, on the level of popular opinion as expressed in the oral tradition and recorded by Eusebius clarity and theological argument might not be expected. The Fathers who showed a compassionate outlook on subjective cases cannot be seen as an approval of a "sort of a religious suicide as comparable to Christian martyrdom."⁴¹ It is an example of pastoral praxis verses theological theory.

This bring us onto Justin Martyr, Augustine and Aquinas who clearly state the church's positions which was later codified in different councils.

1.5. Justin Martyr:

Most authors see Augustine as the first to give an outright condemnation of suicide but to accept this view would cause us to overlook Justin Martyr who condemned the practice

⁴⁰ Blazquez, N., "The Church's traditional moral teaching on suicide" *Concilium* 179, p. 67.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

well before Augustine. He addresses the issue of suicide in his *Second Apology*.⁴² It is apologetic in style arguing against injustices done to the church while defending accusations made against the faith. In chapter IV he addresses the subject of direct interest for this project when he states what must have been a line of argument or a catch cry of the Romans at this time, “All of you, go, kill yourselves thus go immediately to God, and save us the trouble” to which he replies “I will explain why we do not do that, and why, when interrogated we boldly acknowledge our faith.”⁴³

Now unlike the writers we have seen to date it seems that he is going to juggle the two poles of the problem, professing the faith and not giving ones life up to death in the face of events which might compromise a believer. Coupled with this is the belief that Christians had a duty, and were important to God’s plan. L. Barnard claimed that Justin Martyr, Shows us “men and women ... who thought it a duty to preserve life so long as God delayed to take it.”⁴⁴ For him God created the world with a purpose, that being for the sake of humankind. God is pleased with those who imitate his divine perfection and displeased with those who chose evil, be it evil in word or in deed, as it frustrates the divine purpose:

If, then, we should all kill ourselves we would be the cause, as far as it is up to us, why no one would be born and be instructed in the divine doctrines, or even why the human race might cease to exist; if we do act thus, we ourselves will be opposing the will of God.⁴⁵

⁴² Dressler, H., (ed.), *The Fathers of the Church Vol.6; The writings of Saint Justin Martyr*, (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press,1948), p. 115 ff.

Justin wrote this in response to executions of three Christians by Urbicus the then perfect of Rome. The sole reason for their execution was their faith.

⁴³*Ibid.*, p. 123, (St Justin Martyr, *Second Apologia*, Chapter IV).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p 116.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 123, (St Justin Martyr, *Second Apologia*, Chapter IV).

Inflicting death on ourselves is against the divine law an argument we have seen already but also against the natural law as it goes against the flourishing of the race. It is the will of God, which is the distinguishing mark. According to Justin Martyr it is not part of the will of God, that we should end our lives prematurely. He uses the same reasoning to show why one should always profess one's faith, as to tell a lie would be displeasing to God. For Justin Martyr the important thing is to act in accordance with the divine will. The progression of the divine purpose by doing what is true to their faith and not acting contrary to it is the central action of the Christian according to Justin Martyr. To commit suicide is for Justin Martyr acting against divine will and against ones faith, as God is "the just supervisor of all".⁴⁶

This was a reoccurring theme in the early church and seen again in the anonymous writings titled the *Epistle to Diogenetus*, which claimed:

The soul is locked up in the body, yet the very thing that holds the body together; so, too, Christians are shut up in the world as in a prison, yet are the very ones that hold the world together. Immortal, the soul is lodged in a mortal tenement; so, too, Christians, though residing as strangers among corruptible things, look forward to the incorruptibility that awaits them in heaven. The soul, when stinting itself in food and drink, is better for it; so, too, Christians, when penalized, increase daily more and more. Such is the important post to which God has assigned them, and it is not lawful for them to desert it.⁴⁷

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, p. 133, (St Justin Martyr, *Second Apologia*, Chapter XII).

⁴⁷ Amundsen, D.A., "Suicide and Early Christian Values", p. 117. Found in Brody, B.A., *Suicide and Euthanasia, historical and contemporary themes*, (London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), p.77-155

Now we see a move or shift in thought. Now the emphasis is on staying true to ones faith while following the will of God the Father. The idea of following the will of God still leaves room for the idea of the martyrs who gave there lives in answer to the inspiration or will of the Father. Fortitude as a virtue of faith, is being promoted by Justin Martyr as the anchor or main stay of the Christian follower.

1.6. St Augustine

Augustine is seen as the person having most influence on how the believing community viewed suicide. His thoughts were also in part influenced by the situation in which he found himself. Firstly he was writing in response to events surrounding the sack of Rome and later in response to the issues arising out of the conflict in North Africa arising from the Donatist schism, which is especially evident in his objections to suicide in his writings on the Gospel of John.

Firstly, let us look at what he has to say on the issue in book one of the *City of God*. This is a book written in response to issues arising out of the sack of Rome and its aftermath. There are a couple of things happening here, firstly we will see that he is addressing the questions of the church at this time, while also answering some of the accusations being made against the church by those outside it. We will also see him use example and counter example to distinguish if the events of the time warranted the response that some people in the Christian community gave in order to avoid sins against chastity.

As regards suicide his opinion is quite clear and it is one, which will have a lasting effect for centuries to follow.

To do justice to Augustine, we must view his ideas in the context of his opening remarks in which he sets out his stall, "I am not so much concerned to give an answer to strangers as to offer comfort to my fellow Christians."⁴⁸ It is written for a specific audience, the Christian community with a specific aim in mind, to answer the questions of the Christian community who are faced with a dilemma in the face of the persecutions. Put simply this dilemma can be summarised by the question, does one give up ones life and attain the status of martyr or does one in the face of persecutions, seemingly, compromise ones chastity and virginity but save ones life? Not an easy question in a time when the former group (the martyrs) were being exalted so much so that some sections of the community saw the taking of ones life as an act of faith.

While there were women as we have seen, who willingly gave their lives rather than be violated there was another group of women who could not find it in themselves to take their lives in the face of such atrocities. So what status had these women? Having been raped had they acted against chastity? Had they committed adultery? Should their commitment to their state of life be questioned? All questions being asked both by the community and by the women themselves.

⁴⁸ Dressler, H., (ed.) *The Fathers of the Church*, "Saint Augustine, The City of God", (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1950), p. 45. (St Augustine *City of God*, Book 1, 16)

Augustine found himself standing between the much-valued tradition of the virgin martyrs who witnessed to the faith and to their vows by taking their lives, and on the other hand the equally valid practice of remaining a witness despite having undergone by force what some of the community saw as a counter witness to ones state as a virgin or as a married women. So how will he steer between these two positions, not take from the role of the martyrs while not excluding or belittling those women who had been raped?

To help steer this delicate course he employs the framework of virtue ethics and an ancient technique of rhetoric called the dilemma, “from whose two premises though incompatible, and for the adversary, unacceptable, conclusions can be drawn.”⁴⁹ This enables him to move away from an act-based morality while holding the two opposing positions in tandem.

At this stage it was the reputation of those women who chose being violated rather than take their lives that needed to be protected. Had these women lost the state of virgins, or for the women who were married had they committed adultery, and had both sinned against chastity? Should they have given up there lives like the virgin martyrs who had gone before them? In short were these women in a state of sin, should they have taken their lives?

⁴⁹ O'Daly, G., *Augustine's City of God, a readers guide*, (Oxford: Clarendon press, 1999), p. 78.

To this he answered:

Therefore let this stand as a firmly established truth: the virtue which governs a good life controls from the seat of the soul every member of the body, and the body is rendered holy by the act of a holy will. Thus as long as the will remains unyielding, no crime, beyond the victim's power to prevent it without sin, and which is perpetrated on the body or in the body, lays any guilt on the soul.⁵⁰

From this we see that these women were not in a state of sin because what happened to them was not a wilful act on their behalf.

What of the issue of "carnal pleasure" which may come about during these acts, this for Augustine is not a sign of consent just a result of nature. "We must not consider as committed with the will that could not, by the very constitution of nature, occur without some fleshly satisfaction."⁵¹ This is again averted to in chapter 25 when talking of the possible sin of consenting to a pleasure provoked by another's lust. To this he replies:

God forbid that any Christian who puts his trust in God and firmly relies on His aid should give sinful consent to fleshly desires, however aroused. If that rebellious concupiscence which still clings to our mortal flesh follows, as it were, a law of its own independent of the law of our will, its stirrings in the body of one who gives no consent are surely as free from fault as its stirrings in the body of one who is asleep.⁵²

For Augustine the community should not be scandalised by these women who did not take their lives. There is no scandal because there is no sin on their part. If they did take

⁵⁰ Dressler, H., (ed.) *The Fathers of the Church*, "Saint Augustine, The City of God", (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1950), p. 46. (St. Augustine, *City of God*, Book 1, chapter 16).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 46. (St. Augustine, *City of God*, Book 1 chapter 16).

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 59. (St. Augustine, *City of God*, Book 1 chapter 25).

their lives they would be doing so, not to avoid sin on their part, as there is none but “to prevent another’s sin.”⁵³

Were does this leave the women who took there lives, was it all in vain? Had they committed suicide, and hence had these once exalted martyrs died in a sinful state? In answering these questions we see him adopt a more pastoral tact. “Anyone with a sense of sympathy will make allowances for those unfortunate women who took their lives rather than submit to such dishonour.”⁵⁴ For him we must see what they did as actions taken in good faith under the inspiration of divine will.

For Augustine chastity is a virtue of the soul and as such not a physical endowment. This being the case “while the intention not to yield to the assaulters stands firm, the body retains its purity because the will retains its intention and, so far as possible, the power – to use the body as a holy thing.”⁵⁵ Purity for him is not, and cannot be measured in the physical sphere, it is an issue of the will and of virtue and hence maintained by “unshakeable continence.” It is because of this reasoning that he concluded chapter 18 by stating:

Thus a woman has no reason to inflict death upon herself when, without consent on her part, she has been the victim of violence and the object of another’s outrage. How much less the reason to do so before the deed. Why should certain homicide be committed while the actual commission of a crime by another is still in doubt?⁵⁶

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 46, (St. Augustine, *City of God*, Book 1 chapter 17).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 46, (St. Augustine, *City of God*, Book 1 chapter 17).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 47, (St. Augustine, *City of God*, Book 1 chapter 18).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 48, (St. Augustine, *City of God*, Book 1 chapter 18).

For Augustine the crime is only attributed to the “ravisher and not at all to the ravished ... not only the souls of Christian women who have been forcibly violated during their captivity, but also their bodies, remain holy.”⁵⁷ For Augustine the Christian women are unlike the Roman example of Lucretia who took her life in shame of the rape committed on her by the son of King Traquin. The Christian women do not depart from Gods law “by any ill advised attempt to avoid the humiliation of human suspicion.”⁵⁸

From the above we can see that Augustine was justifying the position of those who chose not to take their lives in the face of the trials of the time. This is of interest as it brings into question the whole issue of the martyrs, especially those who directly took their lives in the face of persecution. On this he is again equally clear:

To be sure, if no one may kill on his own authority even a guilty man – no law grants such a power to kill – then, even a person taking his own life is, of course, a homicide, he is the more guilty in killing himself, the less responsibility he had for the cause that prompted his suicide.⁵⁹

This is tied up in the prohibition “thou shall not kill”⁶⁰ which he sees to include both oneself and one’s neighbour, it includes all “linked to us by association and common bond ... It only remains for us to apply the commandment ‘thou shall not kill’ to man alone, oneself and others. And, of course, one who kills himself kills a man.”⁶¹ This is the lowest common denominator for Augustine; suicide is the unlawful taking of ones life.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 49. (St. Augustine, *City of God*, Book 1 chapter 19).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 52. (St. Augustine, *City of God*, Book 1 chapter 19).

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 46. (St. Augustine, *City of God*, Book 1 chapter 17).

⁶⁰ Ex. 20:13, 16.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p 53. (St. Augustine, *City of God*, Book 1 chapter 20)

While there are exceptions⁶² the general rule is that “anyone who kills a human being, himself or another is guilty of murder.”⁶³

He then questions what must have been the opinion of the time, that what these women did displayed a great courage:

If you consider the matter rationally, courage is scarcely the right word to use when a man does away with himself because he is unable to endure adversity or the misdeeds of others. Surely, we should call it cowardice when a man is not brave enough to bear up when his body is in chains or when he has to face the folly of public opinion. There is more courage in a man who faces rather than flees the storms of life, and who holds cheap the opinion of men, especially that of the rabble. For what is public opinion but a cloud of error, compared with the light and purity of one’s conscience.⁶⁴

This must be read in the context in which it was written. It was written both for a people and a church, which had undergone persecution, and in which people were taking their lives rather than compromising their faith or their morals.

To support this view he cites Matthew’s gospel⁶⁵ where Jesus tells his disciples to flee the city in times of persecution. Life is of greater value and the time of persecution will pass so it is better for the disciple to flee and live. For Augustine Jesus “neither bade nor counselled even those (his disciples) to pass out of life for whom He promised to prepare

⁶² Included in these are occasions when God authorises killing by a general law or when God gives an explicit commission to an individual for a limited time, or to wage war at God’s bidding, or for the State’s authority to put a criminal to death according to law or the rule of rational justice.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 54. (St. Augustine, *City of God*, Book 1 chapter 21).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 54. (St. Augustine, *City of God*, Book 1 chapter 22).

⁶⁵ Matt. 10:23.

eternal mansions after their passage from earth.”⁶⁶ The gift of eternal life was theirs at a time appointed by God and not the disciple.

At the end of Chapter 22 he makes it quite clear “Suicide is a sin for those who worship the one true God.”⁶⁷ He reiterates this later by saying “and the truth is obvious that self destruction is an abominable and damnable crime, who is so foolish as to say:

Let us sin now lest we sin later. Let us commit murder now that we may not later perhaps commit adultery. Wickedness has such control that sin is chosen instead of purity, is not a future and uncertain adultery preferable to a present and certain murder?⁶⁸

As we can see the arguments against the taking of ones life is gaining strength. The taking of ones life for the avoidance of either the possible or probable event of rape is for Augustine not justified.

He goes onto to state what will become another lasting argument “Is it not preferable to perform a bad act which may be expiated by penance rather than do a wrong that will leave no room for repentance?” This will be come a reoccurring theme for later moralists and a grave worry for surviving relatives. Not only is it a mortal sin, but now due to the nature of the sin the persons involved die in a state of sin with no possibility of receiving the sacraments. This is developed further when he states, “no one may end his own life out of a desire to attain a better life which he hopes for after death, because a better life

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, p. 55. (St. Augustine, *City of God*, Book 1 chapter 22).

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, p. 55. (St. Augustine, *City of God*, Book 1 chapter 22).

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, p. 59. (St. Augustine, *City of God*, Book 1, chapter 25).

after death is not for those who perish by their own hand.”⁶⁹ The notion that it might be used as an escape from current trials to enjoy the possibilities of future peace is for him a misnomer, the act by its very nature excludes one from the peace experienced in forgiveness and hence the joys of heaven.

This leaves him with the problem of the women who did kill themselves rather than be subjected to the awful act of rape and whose graves were being venerated by the church as the tombs of the martyrs. Why reverence people who under the logic he has employed are damned? Amidst the hard moral teaching we now see a more gentle pastoral approach to this issue. He refuses to make rash judgement claiming that one cannot say why the Church honours their memory. Maybe they are honoured as the result of reliable testimony of the events which lead to their death. Here we see subjective considerations peer through. He also leaves open the idea that these women may have acted at God’s bidding and hence not in error or contradiction to the God of life, but in obedience. In support of this case he uses the case of Samson who by pulling down the pillars took his own life but did so under divine authority and inspiration.

The *City of God* is not the only place in which Augustine deals with the issue of suicide. In his *Tractates on the Gospel of John* we also see him make reference to suicide. His comments here are influenced by the constant presence and pressure of the Donatist in North Africa. In Tractate 51 when talking about the line of scripture from John’s Gospel “he who loves his life will lose it” but warns against the wrong interpretation of the text:

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, p. 61. (St. Augustine, *City of God*, Book 1 chapter 26).

But watch out that a wish to destroy yourself not creep upon you unawares, by so understanding that you ought to hate your life in this world. For this, certain evil and wicked men, in themselves crueller and more criminal murderers, give themselves to flames, suffocate in water, smash themselves by leaping from a height, and perish. Christ did not teach this; rather to the devil suggesting such a leap, he even answered, 'Get behind me Satan; it has been written, 'you shall not tempt the Lord your God.'⁷⁰

Using the example of Peter who would have a rope tied around his waist and brought where he would rather not go, he claims that it is clear that "he who follows Christ's steps ought to be killed not by himself but by another"⁷¹ For Augustine the only time death is to be chosen is at that "critical juncture" where one must act in contradiction to God's teaching or depart from this life. Then "let him hate his life in this world so that he may keep it for life eternal."⁷²

It must be said as we come to the end of our account on Augustine's thoughts on suicide that the idea that he formulated the Christian position on suicide would be false. A more accurate view would be that he helped remove many of the ambiguities and brought clarity to an already held position.

⁷⁰ Halton, T.P., *The Fathers of the Church Vol. 88*, "St. Augustine Tractates on the Gospel of John 28-54", (Washington: The Catholic university of America Press, 1993), p. 227. Also look at Tractate 11.15 where he gives examples of the Donatists actions in this regard.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 227.

1.7. St. Thomas Aquinas

This brings us to one of the last major influences on the early church's thought on the subject of suicide. St Thomas under the influence of Aristotle deals directly with the issue of suicide, in the *Summa*, under the whole question of Homicide. In other sections of his work we see him deal with it in a less detailed fashion.

The question is asked, "Is it legitimate for somebody to kill himself?"⁷³ In responding to this question he outlines the different arguments used to justify the act of suicide. This has the effect of provoking discussing or at least thought in the mind of the reader. When compared with homicide we see that it is not the same. Firstly, in the case of homicide we see the whole issue of an injustice done to another by shortening their lives, on which stands the wrongness of homicide. But in the case of suicide such an injustice does not exist, as one cannot commit an injustice against oneself. Secondly, it is claimed that a person in authority may kill what he calls 'malefactors' but the situation could arise where the person of authority would also be a 'malefactor' and hence it could be legitimate for him to kill himself. Here he uses the principle that one can expose oneself to a lesser evil in order to avoid a greater one. Hence it could be conceivable for one to commit suicide in order to avoid a greater evil. The examples he uses are that of shame resulting from some sin and or a wretched life. To further the discussion he then turns to scripture with its examples of Samson who took his life and is now numbered among the

⁷³ Aquinas, St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae Vol. 38*, (London: Blackfriars, 1975), p. 31.
(Aquinas, St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae 2a2ae. 64, 5*)

saints. He also sites Razis whose death is described as a noble death, nothing noble can be seen as illicit and hence suicide is not illicit.⁷⁴

Then comes a change in outlook when he states something we have seen already in reference to Augustine, “It remains that the precept, thou shall not kill, refers to man. And this means both other men and oneself. For nobody but a man is killed when a person commits suicide.”⁷⁵ In short suicide is the wrongful taking of human life, albeit one’s own. To support this he uses Deuteronomy 32:39⁷⁶ to show how God has total authority on the subject of life and death.

After his statement of correction we see him introduce his tripartite reason for suicide being a sin. It is this statement which will become the popular argument against suicide both in the religious and civil realm. Firstly, it goes against the law of nature in that everything of nature loves itself and so strives to keep itself in being. For him “Suicide is, therefore always a mortal sin in so far as it stultifies the law of nature and charity.”⁷⁷ Secondly, by his nature, man is communitarian and social and so suicide offends and more importantly damages the community. “Suicide therefore involves damaging the community.”⁷⁸ Thirdly, we see that suicide is a sin against God the author and governor of life. For him:

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 32. (St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae. 64, 5).

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 33. (St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae. 64, 5).

⁷⁶ “See now that I, I am he, and besides me there is no other god. It is I who deal death and life; when I have struck, it is I who heal (no one can rescue anyone from me.)” Deut.32:39.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33. (St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae. 64, 5).

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 33. (St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae. 64, 5).

Life is a gift made to man by God, and it is subject to him who is master of death and life. Therefore a person who takes his own life sins against God ... God alone has authority to decide about life and death, as he declares in Deuteronomy, I kill and I make alive.⁷⁹

So for Aquinas suicide is a sin as it goes against nature, the community and God. This he distils further when he claims that it is a sin against charity to self, and when considered in relation to ones community and to God it is seen as a sin against Justice. For Aquinas “thus a suicide offers injury, not to himself but to the community and to God. Accordingly he is punished by human and divine law, even as St. Paul declares in respect of a fornicator, if any one destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him.”⁸⁰

Having outlined his position he then addresses the opening questions. He claims that nobody can be judge in there own case and so the person in authority may not kill himself for a sin would be done. Secondly, we are masters of ourselves because of freewill but the object of death is for Aquinas outside the realm of freewill, it is God who has authority in this field. This is compounded by the fact that death is the greatest evil and hence it would be the taking on of a greater evil to avoid a lesser one. Added to this is the depriving oneself of the time needed for repentance. Finally, in the cases of the virgins or people who commit suicide in order to avoid a future sin he claims that it is never permissible to commit evil so that good may come of it. On the issues of the biblical characters he sides with Augustine claiming that Samson was acting under the influence of the Spirit who gave him the power to do such a miracle, while Razis was doing that which he saw as an act of courage. He does claim that it was not true courage but a

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 33. (St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae. 64, 5).

⁸⁰ Aquinas, St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, Vol. 37, (London: Blackfriars, 1975), p. 63. (St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae. 59, 4.).

softness of spirit, yet he does not condemn him. Again we see in the general issue the judgements and conclusions are definite but on particular cases, judgements are not as decisive.

1.8. Councils

With time the theology of the fathers was to become the foundation on which the tradition of the Church was built. We began to see their theology influence how the official church dealt with the problem of suicide.

The Council of Ancyra in 314 makes reference to the issue of suicide in relation to a man who was betrothed to a woman but who conceived a child with her sister. Despite this he married his betrothed but the pregnant sister hung herself. The Council decreed “the parties to this affair were ordered to be received among the co-standards after ten years [of penance] according to the prescribed degrees.”⁸¹ In an editors note this included anybody who was cognizant of the affair.

One of the first Councils or Synods to address the problem directly was the second Council of Arles, which took place from 443-452. In canon 53 of this council we see the blame for suicide resting with the person who committed the act and not anybody else.

⁸¹ Schaff and Henery (Ed.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Vol. XIV, The Seven Ecumenical Councils*, (Michigan: W.M. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971).

This canon states that when a servant or slave commits suicide, he alone is culpable or guilty and the master cannot be blamed for it.⁸² The suicide is held fully responsible.

The issue is discussed again at the second Council of Orleans in 533. Here one of the canons claim that the '*oblaciones defunctorum*' is to be given to those who will be executed because of some crime but it is not to be given to those who have given themselves up to death.⁸³ This seems to convey the idea that the privileges offered to the dead of the ecclesial community are not to be shared by those who took their own life by suicide.

The second Council of Braga also found reason to rule on the subject, the point of contention being the funeral. This council stated that in regard to those who have committed suicide one will make no mention of them in the holy sacrifice, and their bodies will be buried without the accompaniment of the singing of the psalms, and it was to be the same with those who had been executed. Here we see the sanctions are being increased as now it seem that mass cannot be offered for their souls. This could be explained by a belief that they were dammed and hence a mass was of little effect. Later in this same council the sanctions are further extended when it is stated that anybody having wished to commit suicide (attempted it) and was prevented from doing so will be excluded from all contact with the Catholic community and from communion for a period

⁸² Hefele, C.J., *Histoire Des Conciles Vol. 2, Tome II, premiere partie*, (Paris: Letouzey et ane, Editeurs, 1908), p. 475.

⁸³ Hefele, C.J., *Histoire Des Conciles Vol. 2, Tome II, deuxieme partie*, (Paris: Letouzey et ane, Editeurs, 1908), p. 1135.

of two months.⁸⁴ In short a temporary excommunicated from the believing community. In some way they are seen as a counter witness and hence excluded on probation as it were.

1.9. Conclusion

We have now journeyed with the Church as she and her theologians tried to cope with the issue of suicide among the early believing community. Suicide was an action adopted as a means of coping with different realities in which the members of the Church found themselves. Be that the case of the virgins in the face of persecution, the Church as a whole dealing with the practices of schismatic groups or just her members dealing with the brokenness of life. The positions, which the different Fathers took on the issue was coloured by the nature of the events to which they were responding. As to the conclusions reached by the Fathers, objectively suicide was seen as wrong but on the subjective level their judgements are not so clear, leaving open the possibility of mercy on the part of God.

We see in the early Councils that suicide continued to be an issue for the early church to which they gave directives for action. Here we see the beginning of codification in regard to the teaching of the Church on the subject suicide, but also directives as to the sanctions placed by the Church on suicides. This was something, which would be continued in the

⁸⁴ Hefele, C.J., *Histoire Des Conciles Vol. 2, Tome III, premiere partie*, (Paris: Letouzey et ane, Editeurs, 1909), p. 181.

manuals, the catechisms, Canon law and in liturgical directives in the centuries to follow right up to the second Vatican Council.

Chapter 2: Moral theology and its treatment of suicide up to the second Vatican Council.

We have seen now how suicide became an issue for the Church in the early persecutions, later in connections with different sects who saw it as an option in the spiritual journey and finally, how it became codified through different Church councils. This codification was to continue through its introduction into Canon Law and Church teaching in the form of the Manuals and the Catechisms. Up to the 2nd Vatican Council this took a particular shape in a Church world, which seemed to look for orthodoxy and uniformity. All this was given a living expression through the words and actions of the liturgy of the church.

2.1. The Manuals

The main source for moral theologies teaching during this period, were the manuals. These books were the textbooks, used for the teaching of moral theology and hence the primary litmus test as to how suicide was viewed in the discipline of moral theology at this time. How the manuals viewed the issue shaped firstly how the priest viewed suicide morally as these were the books used in their study during formation. As a result this filtered down to the community as a whole, as they were to experience first hand the teaching, which grew from the influence of the manuals. Hence the influence of the manuals cannot be underestimated.

While the manuals may have varied a little in their layout for the most part they held a very similar schema. They divided fundamental moral into four main chapters, these included a chapter on human acts, law, conscience, and sin. Following these came a chapter on the theological virtues and their obligations. The chapters were divided

according to the Ten Commandments, to which were added the precepts of the Church and certain canonical prescriptions. This was often followed by the sacraments, which were studied in the light of the obligations required for their administration. In regard to the sacrament of Holy Orders we shall see that suicide and attempted suicide had definite effects on its administration.

There were some developments in this schema, which saw a shift from the commandment structure to one anchored in the idea of Christian virtue. Despite this the material did not change, obligations and legal propositions still shaped their teaching, and directed pastoral action. We see that the virtues, which allied themselves most closely with the idea of law were the ones which held prominence. Pickaers takes the example of justice and chastity verses hope and courage. Coupled with this we see the idea of one's final end as the thing being stressed and not the possibility of finding true happiness in this world as well as in the next.

This focusing on the end things did serve to give the teaching a greater impact, a point that, we shall see in relation to our study.⁸⁵ Richard A. Mc Cormac while talking about moral theology of the 40s and 50s claimed that they were influenced heavily by the *Institutiones Theologiae Moralis*⁸⁶ of which he claimed "was all too often one-sidedly confession-oriented, magisterial-dominated, canon law-related, sin-centred, and seminary-controlled."⁸⁷

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 299.

⁸⁶ The authors of which were Genicot, Nodin, Prummer, Aertnys-Damen, et al.

⁸⁷ Curran, and McCormac, "Moral Theology 1940-1989: an overview", p. 6, *Theological Studies* 50 (1989).

From this brief overview of the type of literature we are dealing with in the manuals we see that they have a definite style and as a result a definite means of expression. It is heavily reliant on the law and as a result takes the format of questions and answers, with clarity as its trademark.

2.1.1. Direct and Indirect Suicide

The distinction between direct and indirect is one of the first distinctions made in all the manuals. In the case of suicide it has also grown out of the experience of the early Church in dealing with the issue of suicide verses martyrdom.

The important thing for the manuals was clarity and this was best achieved through definitions. The manuals saw suicide as the:

Full use of reason and the deliberate intension, direct or indirect, of ending ones life, a man does not commit suicide if he kills himself accidentally, or through carelessness, or in order to escape certain danger of death, or when in a state of mental derangement, be it complete or partial, permanent or temporary; or indirectly by doing or omitting something the fatal consequences of which he might and should have foreseen, but does not advert to on account of their remoteness.⁸⁸

From this definition we can see that the parameters which define direct suicide are tight. There must be full knowledge of the act and its consequences. Use of full reason and total freedom in choosing the action must also be evident. And finally the intent must be the ending of one's life. The manuals do at times make a further distinction for situations

⁸⁸ Knock-Preuss, *Handbook of Moral Theology*, (London: B. Herder Book Company, 1920), p. 80.

when death can be foreseen due to a non-sinful act. In such cases it is regarded as suicide unless it is something commanded by duty, “as when a priest or a physician visits a patient who is suffering from a contagious disease or when a soldier goes into battle.”⁸⁹ These distinctions may at times seem laboured but for the purpose of pastoral praxis they are important. They allow for the inclusion of people in the prayer of the Church, and could be the difference between communion and excommunication.

2.1.2 Evidence of Philosophy in the Manuals

Before resorting to the scriptures to prove God’s sovereignty over life and death, we see the manuals employ philosophy to support the church’s position on the value of life and on the issue of who had authority over deciding its extinction. Here we see humanity portrayed as possessions of the deity. We see the manuals quote the ideas of philosophy, stating that if the pagans view life in this way how much more we as a believing community should believe that God is both the author and ruler of life. For example, “Yet I, too, believe that the gods are our guardians, and that we men are a possession of theirs ... If we look at the matter thus, there may be reason on saying that a man should wait, and not take his life until God summons him, as he is now summoning me.”⁹⁰ In short we do not have any authority in regard to life and death.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 80

⁹⁰ Plato, *Phaedo*, 61b-62d

In looking at the Greek world ethic, we see that there was a concern in philosophy for the problem of suicide. Ludwig claimed that from earliest times:

The preservation of life was a matter of course, while the question of rationally justifying such a view was not even thought of ... In the mystery cults (particular Orphism) life is seen as a time of atonement, and suicide appears as an encroachment on the rights of the gods because the time of expiation is thereby interrupted.⁹¹

He goes on to cite Theodorus a Cyrenaic philosopher who was one of the first resolute opponents of suicide who claimed, "that no earthly evil is so great that we must need to pass out of life in order to escape from it."⁹² Despite his opposition his disciple Hegesias so eloquently praised suicide in a book devoted to the problem that it became a public menace and was forbidden in several countries.

It was the Stoics who gave the most outright approval of suicide. For them the "truly wise man is self sufficient and absolutely indifferent to all external goods, including life itself."⁹³ In the words of Seneca:

Nature has provided only one entrance into life but many exits, and this is the advantage of rational man over the animal. If you cannot avoid misery, yet you can escape it. Philosophy attains this victory. It teaches us to prefer freely chosen death to natural death which only fools can call beautiful.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Ludwig, R., *Foundations in Morality Vol. 2*, (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Company, 1936), p. 330.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 330.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 331.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 331.

Plato declined suicide, not because a man did not have the right to take his life, but because he regarded it harmful to the soul in that the soul was prevented from freeing itself from all material dross. Aristotle would forbid suicide because a person shrinks his duties towards the state. While outlining some of the earlier philosophers who condemned suicide as a desertion of the post assigned by the deity, nevertheless he declare that certain hard circumstances may be regarded as a call by the deity to leave one's post. For example, incurable disease and loss of honour or wealth in short the same things which are still seen as contributing to the causes of suicide today. Phythagoras was one who held such views, and who subsequently ended his own life.

We can see here in this brief overview of the philosophical debate as it appeared in the Manuals that the debate among the ancient philosophers mirrored that which took place among the theologians of the manual tradition. Connell for example saw suicide as "an act of injustice against society and against God, for every human being is a member of society and a creature of God. The suicide also fails in the charity he owes to himself."⁹⁵ The authors of the manuals were formed in the scholastic period and as such could not but engage the philosophical debate as it informed their thinking and was the scaffolding of their theology.

⁹⁵ Connell, F.J., *Outlines of Moral Theology*, (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1953), p. 124.

2.1.3 Natural Law

Following on from philosophy we see natural law being employed as another foundation stone on which the manuals objected to suicide. Suicide was seen as something diametrically opposed to the strongest instincts of nature, that of self-preservation. “The tendency to preserve life is the necessary law of life, not of human life only but all life.”⁹⁶

When measured against this measure suicide was seen as a most unnatural act and as such left open the way for the possibility of a psychological problem being the root cause.

Some authors tried to weaken the hold that this argument based on the law of nature had on the prohibition of suicide. These claimed that suicide was not an action against the law of nature as the soul lives on, and the body will rise again in the resurrection. Hence the desire is not to “compass his own destruction”. This was seen as a misinformed view of what was meant by the term the law of nature. Knock and Preuss quoting from Cronin claim:

Natural tendencies are all tendencies to the well being of the natural agent, the agent regarded as a product of nature. Nature could not set up in anything a tendency towards a condition which is either unnatural or which is even above nature. But the natural constitution of man, from which springs all our natural powers and appetites, is that of a composite of body and soul combined to form one person. And therefore our natural desire for happiness is a desire for the happiness and well being of the natural person, consisting of body and soul. In suicide therefore, we use our natural powers for an end which is the frustration of their natural purposes.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Knock-Preuss, *Handbook of Moral Theology*, (London: B. Herder Book Company, 1920), p. 76.

⁹⁷ Cronin, M., *The Science of Ethics, Vol. II*, (Dublin: Gill, 1909), p. 55.

It was for this very reason that the manuals employ natural law to show that suicide was against the natural order. Nature is driven to promote not destroy itself. Davis takes up on this point saying that suicide is a “direct violation of Natural law and therefore of God’s law.” This is a point also made by Kiely when he claims that suicide is “opposed to the natural law – to the good of society. It is an act of cowardice. God alone is the master of life and death.”⁹⁸ To develop this point further, man as a rational animal achieves his perfection and last end by using his body. “If by suicide he makes this use impossible, he is by that act making it impossible for him to achieve his last end.”⁹⁹ For Davis this is the greatest perversion of rational nature that is possible.

In an article in the *Ecclesiastical Review* we see Mac Donald refer to St. Aquinas who saw suicide as unlawful “because it is against the law of nature which dictates the conservation of one's life, and it is against the love which one owes oneself.”¹⁰⁰ Preuss starts chapter three of his book claiming that “we see that it goes against nature not to care for the body, its all part of the instinct of preservation.”¹⁰¹ Therefore, destruction of self is seen as an act, which is contrary to the nature of humanity, which has self-preservation at its core.

⁹⁸ Kiely, J., *Instructions of Christian Morality, for preachers and teachers*, (London: B. Heder Book Company, 1925), p. 228.

⁹⁹ Davis, H., *Moral and Pastoral Theology*, (London: Sheed and Ward, 1935), p. 114.

¹⁰⁰ Mac Donald, A., “Is suicide ever justifiable”, *The Ecclesiastical Review*, (No. 5, November 1915), p. 683.

¹⁰¹ Preuss, A., *A handbook in Moral Theology*, (London: B. Herder Book Company, 1920), p. 98.

2.1.4 Double Effect

Having looked at the different theological implications of suicide Davis uses the principle of double effect. He evaluates some moral cases such as hunger strikes or a woman exposing herself to certain death in order to preserve her virginity. On this case he takes the example of her jumping from a tall building. This has two possible effects; firstly, her jumping enables her to escaping being violated. Secondly, we could view her death as not being directly wished but as something, which is permitted. Coupled with this example he gives the example of the person who by offering the means of life to someone puts at certain risk their own life. The third example is that of the dispatch rider jumping into a river in order to avoid the enemy and save the dispatch. Seeing the current to be too strong he still swims on instead of returning to the enemy. As in all the examples there is a double effect, the first to elude the enemy and save the dispatch, and secondly, his death. This effect he sees but is willing to risk.

He continues with the example of the officer who stands in open battle in order to inspire his troops courage but gets shot in the process. Again he sees the two effects, the first to inspire his men to courage and the second his death, which he foresaw and put up with as it were. He then contrasts the man who jumped of a boat to commit suicide verses the man who jumps out of the boat in order to lighten it and save the boat from sinking. Again using double effect he shows how the first is morally wrong while the second is permitted.

In conclusion he looks at severe mortification, which may shorten one's life but is lawful if prudently used or if divinely inspired. The sinful exposure of one's life for vain ostentation or where, no countervailing good to be obtained is not allowed.¹⁰² Double effect is used to justify the losing of one's life for a sufficiently grave reason. One "may perform an action from which death will result as one effect, there being an equally immediate good effect, which will sufficiently compensate for his death."¹⁰³ With this in mind and using the reasoning of double effect Davis would claim that suicide is not permitted. The number of different cases he covered gives an indication as to the detail that the manuals went into in an attempt to cover all situations.

2.1.5 God as sovereign creator.

This is an argument, which is seen in a lot of the manuals and one, which is influenced by the thoughts of philosophy and the idea of life as gift. Preuss claimed that:

Life being a gift of such immense value, we are in duty bound to cherish it; or as St. Paul says, we must redeem the time hence no man is allowed to destroy or curtail his life, even though it may have become a burden and is seemingly of no further value.¹⁰⁴

The argument that life is a gift from the creator is a reoccurring theme. It is a theme couched in the language of justice, in that, it is an injustice to assume such a prerogative

¹⁰² Davis, H., *Moral and Pastoral theology Vol.2*, (London: Sheed and Ward, 1935), p. 115-118.

¹⁰³ Connell, F.J., *Outlines of moral Theology*, (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1953), p. 124.

¹⁰⁴ Preuss, A., *A Handbook of Moral Theology*, (London: B. Herder Book Company, 1920), p. 12.

over the one who has true authority in this field, God. "It supposes an authority and dominion that does not belong to any man where life is concerned."¹⁰⁵

Coppens in his argument against suicide claimed that the person who committed suicide rejects the greatness of God their creator. He claims that "the suicide rejects this greatness; he robs God of service and glory, he rebels against his Creator."¹⁰⁶ Now suicide is viewed as an injustice being acted against God the creator in that, the created rebels not only against its nature but also against that, which brought it into being:

His life does not belong to him alone, but to God also and God principally; if you destroy it, you violate God's right, and you will have to settle with Him. God willed this man to live and serve him, if it were only by patient endurance of his suffering.¹⁰⁷

The point being stressed here is God's right to both give and take life, a right, which cannot be infringed. The most notable development here is that now we see the inclusion of consequences for those who violate this boundary. The deterrent is not just an infringement of God's right, but also the prospect of an unfavourable judgement.

¹⁰⁵ Stapleton. *Moral Beliefs*, (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1904), p. 218.

¹⁰⁶ Coppens, C., *Moral Principles and medical practice*, (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1929), p. 45.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

This argument has inbuilt a ruling out of the quality of life argument as a means of justifying the action of taking one's life. Coppens, while using Christian ideas hangs his agreement on the logic of Plato, as he claims:

Even Plato of old understood the baseness of suicide, when he wrote in his dialogue called the 'Phaedon' that a man in this world is like a soldier stationed on guard; he must hold his post as long as his commander requires it; to desert it is cowardice and treachery; thus, he says, suicide is a grievous crime.¹⁰⁸

This idea of humanity in service of God is seen again and again with different emphases. Firstly, with Davis in connection with suicide being a serious offence against society of which man is an organism, and as such is in service to it and also to its creator. Now we see introduced the idea of service. "Man, by creation is a servant of God; no servant has dominion over those elements that are of the essence of his service."¹⁰⁹

For Davis suicide prevents the divine purpose being realised and interrupts one's service of God. While not much hope is shown in this analysis it does raise one question, can the divine purpose be prevented? Should he have said that suicide interrupts the divine purpose and prevents one's service. This leaves the way open for greater hope in that while the element of service may have finished, there is still room for the divine purpose to operate. For Davis this is not an issue in that humankind like all else "must sub serve the glory of God. He cannot do so equally well by putting an end to his life as by continuing to live."¹¹⁰ For him by natural law man "enjoys the use not the dominion over

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁰⁹ Davis, H., *Moral and Pastoral Theology Vol.2*, (London: Sheed and Ward, 1935), p. 115.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

his life. He neither gives it nor may he take it away. God is the author of life.”¹¹¹ This argument can be summed up in the words of Job, “God give and God takes away”.

Knock-Preuss when dealing with this point claim that:

According to the principles of Christian morality a person who commits suicide while in the full possession of his mental faculties is not only a murderer and a criminal, but renounces God and the hope of salvation, and forfeits every right to the blessing of the Church, including that to a Christian burial. In denying any one the last mentioned privilege the Church, of course does not mean to pass judgement on his probable fate in the other world.¹¹²

It is seen that such a transgression into the realm of divine power and a rejection of the divine gift of life brings with it the loss of all privileges which the church may grant.

This argument is often expressed in virtue language. The language employed to illustrate this is the language of the Christian virtues of faith, hope and confidence in God.¹¹³ When looking at the whole issue of the virtues, quality of life or productivity is not the measuring point, now the important element is one’s duty to society and to one’s God. This can be achieved through a life lived in witness to “Christian fortitude”¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

¹¹² Knoch-Preuss *Handbook of Moral Theology*, (London: B. Herder Book Company, 1920), p. 79.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

2.1.6 Suicide and society.

This again is an argument, which is a remnant of the philosophical arguments. Here we see such views, as “suicide is a serious offence against society, for man is naturally destined for society and is an organism that belongs to it.”¹¹⁵ Our value is vested, in that we are persons that live in relationship, we are social beings and as a result society has a mark of ownership on us. This, results in the fact that we cannot take from society, deprive it as it were, of one of its resources. In short because our lives are the greatest good we possess and can offer suicide is seen as a sin against charity; charity to society and charity to oneself.¹¹⁶

Keily when looking at the Fifth Commandment supports this view as he sees suicide as an act of cowardice and “opposed to the natural law and to the common good of society.”¹¹⁷ Another author states “the decisive factor, is not public opinion but the duty which the individual owes to society and which he is still able to fulfil, even though it be only by giving an example of Christian fortitude.”¹¹⁸ Again we see a concern with the social dimension both in the loss of a member of society, but also and more importantly the duty that the individual has to that society and to the common good. “Charity begins at home, means that we ourselves are the first objects of our charity. If therefore we must respect the life of our neighbour, the obligation is still greater to respect our own.”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵Herbermann, C., et al (ed.), *The Catholic Encyclopaedia*, (New York: Robert Appelson Company, 1912), p.325.

¹¹⁶*Ibid.*, p.326.

¹¹⁷Kiely, J., *Instruction on Christian Morality*, (London: B. Herder Book Company, 1925), p. 228.

¹¹⁸Preuss, A., *A handbook of Moral Theology*, (London: B. Heder Book Company, 1920), p. 78.

¹¹⁹Stapleton, *Moral beliefs*, (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1904), p. 217.

2.1.7 Reasons for Suicide

The why of today's society as to why do so many people take their lives is also evident in the manuals. Many of the manuals give what they see as the reasons for suicide. It would be profitable to look at just some of the reasons put forward as to why people commit suicide as these might help us to see where the manuals are coming from in their views and judgement on suicide.

As Preuss points out that:

Suicide is also forbidden indirectly because of the immoral motives that usually inspire it, e.g., unbelief, cowardice, false notions of honour, an excessive craving for glory, wealth, etc. of that dullness of mind which results from overindulgence in carnal pleasures and usually ends by making its victim incapable of further enjoyment.¹²⁰

In another place we see him write how an impure life leads to all kinds of complications and disintegration. He claims that:

Impurity not only causes concupiscence to grow stronger, but leads to self-deception, inconstancy in the keeping of good resolutions, indifference towards considerations of honour and property, intemperance in eating and drinking, disgust for spiritual things, dread of eternity, hatred of God, unbelief and suicide.¹²¹

¹²⁰Kncoh- Preuss, *A handbook of Moral Theology*, (London: B. Herder Book Company, 1920), p. 75.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

He also states that suicide could be seen as an effort to escape God his judge rather than try to “atone for his sins in the way prescribed, namely by contrition and penance, is a pagan, not Christian motive.”¹²² Now we see value judgements being introduced which have a strong effect on the moral evaluation of suicide as now the supposed contributing factors to a suicide are themselves seen as sinful. It is a case of sin building on sin. This gives the condemnation a double foundation; firstly, towards the act of suicide itself but also in relation to the lifestyle one leads which was seen to have influenced one towards taking one’s life. Pagan as it were in lifestyle and so pagan in the treatment one received from the church. One was excommunication by ones lifestyle as by ones final act. He does allow for charity where “mental alienation” may be presumed.

For Ruland it is insanity not lifestyle which is the contributing factor to one taking one’s life. He claims that:

For one who is mentally ill reacts to interior and exterior troubles differently than one who is in good health and therefore reasons which may not in themselves be accepted as valid may nevertheless strongly influence the intellect and the will, thus recommending the unfortunate victim to leniency of the Church and justifying the physician in wording the death certification accordingly.¹²³

Here we see a different outlook in that now the person is seen as a “victim” therefore not fully in control, their insanity leads to diminished responsibility which changes how the Church will look at their circumstance.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 78.

¹²³ Ruland. L., *Pastoral Medicine*, (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Company, 1936), p. 219.

O'Malley and Walsh in their book *Essays in Pastoral Medicine*, do give some time to looking at the causes as they see them for suicide.

Most suicide persons that have been recognised as paranoiacs and likely to do queer things for a long time beforehand. Indeed, some of the melancholic qualities on which the unfortunate impulse to self-murder depends are likely to have exhibited themselves in former generations. Not long since it was argued that the regular occurrence of a certain number of suicides every year - varying in various places, always on the increase, but evidently showing a definite relationship to certain local conditions - demonstrate that the human will is not free,¹²⁴ since from a set of statistics one can foretell about how many cases of suicide would take place in a given city during the next year. As a matter of fact, suicides are not in possession of free will as a rule, but are the victims of circumstances and are unable to resist external influences.¹²⁵

With this in mind it is claimed that a more charitable view on the issue would be attained, which is both a judgement on how the teaching had been seen and maybe an eye on where it was going.

Another contributing factor outlines here and in other publications is the role of the media. In conclusion he states, that, "All the influences of the clergyman can exert then, must be wielded to suppress this as well as the many other evils which flow from sensational journalism." The phenomenon of the copycat suicide is not new and is a constant challenge to pastoral ministry.

¹²⁴ After citing this passage Knock and Preuss do qualify things by saying that not always is freewill hindered, while not all cases of suicide have attached to them personal guilt. In many ways they are trying to avoid generalizations. Knoch - Preuss, *Handbook of Moral Theology*, (London: B. Herder Book Company, 1920), p. 77.

¹²⁵ O' Malley and Walsh, *Essays in Pastoral Medicine*, (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1921), p. 306.

2.2. Catechism and suicide up to Vatican II

While the manuals formed how moralists and the clergy were to view the moral life it was the catechism which was to be the learning tool by which the majority of the lay people in the pre Vatican Church were to equip themselves theologically for the everyday struggles of life.

The formulation of the catechism emerged during the early period of the Council of Trent in relation to scripture and preaching as it was seen to “containing everything that the clergy needed for the celebration of the sacraments.”¹²⁶ No definitive copy of a Catechism was published until 15 years later when we saw a shift in its purpose as now it was seen as an “instrument for insuring orthodoxy.”¹²⁷ It was published after the death of Pius V. Its official title was “A Catechism for pastors by decree of the Council of Trent Published by order of Pius V, Supreme Pontiff” it became known as the “Roman Catechism” due to its papal backing and its central position within the schema of the Council of Trent. It was not until 1829 was it translated into English¹²⁸. Trent’s catechism does reflect the times and circumstances in which it was written. “Without being polemical it relies on authority – proof-texts from Scripture and the Church fathers.”¹²⁹

¹²⁶ Marthaler, B. L., *The Catechism Yesterday and Today*, (The Liturgical Press: Minnesota, 1995), p. 35.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹²⁸ Donovan, J., (tr.), *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, (Dublin: James Duffy, 1867), p.360.

¹²⁹ Marthaler, B. L., *The Catechism Yesterday and Today*, (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1995), p. 40.

The Trent Catechism deals with the issue of suicide in chapter VI in terms of the fifth commandment. The centrality of this teaching is stressed by the support of scripture. The prohibition against any attack on life is the first prohibition put in place after the deed of creation is completed. We see it in Genesis 9:5 and reinforced again in the Old Testament among the precepts of the old law first expounded by our Lord and again in Matthew 21, “it was seen thou shall not kill”. This is seen in the Catechism as a protective command and as such “avoidance of the sin which is prohibited by the commandment should be pleasing.”¹³⁰

In question 9 of the same chapter we see another question aimed against suicide when it states, “To no one is it lawful to slay on private authority.”¹³¹ We see in Trent that suicide is never directly dealt with but it is clearly seen in the arguments against homicide that it too is unjust and to be avoided. We see in the section dealing with Holy Orders that ecclesiastical law should exclude “men of blood and homicides”. Again we see that sins against life are seen as a grave matter and carry with them grave penalty.

Orthodoxy did come with the publication and proliferation of the Trent Catechism but with time so too did a variety of Catechisms stressing different themes. Again in a call to obtain uniformity the First Vatican Council called for a universal catechism for the whole Church. The Franco Prussian war caused a suspension of the council and it was never to reconvene. But in regard to the idea of a catechism it did have a lasting effect. This was seen in relation to the Irish bishops at a national synod 1875 when they called for a

¹³⁰ Donovan, J., (tr.), *Catechism of Trent*, (Dublin: J.M. O’Toole & Son, 1829), p. 361.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 363.

“national catechism” the result being the Maynooth Catechism of 1882 and later the American Church followed suit at the third Plenary Council of Baltimore in 1884 with a call for a catechism for the United States. The development of this catechism from 1885 to 1941 when the second edition was published saw much of the same technique employed. None of the theological developments such as the:

kerugmatik theology and biblical studies brought a fresh approach to the scriptures and to the presentation of the doctrine of morality; liturgical movement had retrieved the ancient understanding the sacraments and the church itself as more than conduits of grace.¹³²

Were to have any influence on the formation of the new Catechism either in formulation or in content.

Some of the manuals based on the catechism did take a hard line on the issue of suicide.

One such example of this is:

Suicides are generally men who are devoid of religious beliefs, who have got into trouble or committed some great sin, and who despair of God’s mercy and assistance; they are sometimes not accountable for their actions, and consequently not to be blamed for them.¹³³

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 119.

¹³³ Clarke, R. F., (ed.), *The Catechism explained*, (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1921), p. 383.

In this volume we see the argument is based on Aquina's threefold notion of a sin against self, community and God and it is due to this that such strong sanctions are imposed. They are not to be seen as a judgement "but express horror of the crime and to act as a deterrent to others"¹³⁴ This catechical manual goes onto state that:

Instead of obtaining relief from suffering, the suicide only falls into what is far worse. The Godless press of the day will excuse the self-murderer, saying: he expiated his crime with his life. Instead of expiating a crime, he adds another to it.¹³⁵

We do see diminished responsibility is granted in the case of madness and nervous breakdown or in cases where lack of knowledge can be proven, but apart from that the aim of the writing seems to deter by fear.

Many commentaries of these catechisms were written as an aid to pastors and to teachers of the faith. In all publications suicide was dealt with under the section dealing with the fifth commandment. An interesting fact is that while suicide is mentioned as something forbidden, little elaboration as to why is cited. Much more time is given to implicit rather than explicit facts or sins against the command. Schumacher in his edition makes reference to suicide when dealing with question 253 which asked "What does the fifth commandment forbid?" and the answer given is "the fifth commandment forbids murder and suicide, and also fighting, anger, hatred, revenge, drunkenness and bad example."¹³⁶ After this we see no direct reference to suicide although indirectly it is dealt with

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 383.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 384.

¹³⁶ Schumacher, M.A., *I teach Catechism Vol. III*, (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1946), p. 217.

concerning the issue of the sanctity of life and also in connection with the issue of scandal and bad example.

One teacher's handbook on the catechism for children does have an interesting spin. It defines suicide as "when a person puts an end to his own life, and murder of the soul when one leads a soul into evil, thus causing him to lose the life of the soul, namely sanctifying grace."¹³⁷ Here we see that the consequences are not speculated on but stated quite clearly. Death occurs both on the human and the spiritual level. Where God is not at work life can no longer exist. Later he describes suicide as one of the "worst crimes" for two reasons, firstly, it is seen as a "usurping to himself a right which belongs to God alone, and by depriving himself of the greatest of all temporal goods."¹³⁸ It is for this reason the author claims that it arouses such disgust both in civil law and also in church law expressed in the refusal "of Christian burial and public prayers to one who has taken his own life."¹³⁹

This viewpoint is in part explained by the main reasons given as to why one would take one's life. Firstly, "the consciousness of guilt; when a person can no longer endure the torments of his conscience. Avoid, therefore, dear children all wicked deeds." The second reason is what he calls the "consequences of excessive and unbridled passion." Both of the above are in and of themselves are sinful and as such leave the person in a sinful state hence apart from the sinful nature of the act itself its motive as it were, is caused by sin. It

¹³⁷ Urban, A., *Teacher's Handbook to the Catechism Vol. II*, (New York: Joseph F., Wanger, 1903), p. 131.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

is only after this that he sites insanity as a cause, and as such a person must not be judged harshly.¹⁴⁰

Later this commentary goes on to look at the whole issue of desiring one's death. And the answer is clear:

No, we may not when the desire proceeds from worldly motives, dejection, or despair; ... generally it is not a fervent and filial love of God that begets a desire of death. It is far more frequently dejection, the trials of life and despair. When one desires to die rather than offend God then it is not really death which is desired, but the deliverance from sin, and we can obtain this deliverance without death by God's grace and with a firm will. We have no reason, therefore to wish for death, God in his wisdom has called us into existence, and He Knows best when it is time to call us out of this life.¹⁴¹

Again God is seen as the sovereign of all life and it is up to him to decide when life should end. But again we see how sin is attached both to the act and to the motive. This is used to both reinforce the Church's teaching on suicide, but also her practice of refusal of burial.

So what was the scaffold on which this teaching hung and found its support? The simple answer is Church law. It set the parameters within which the catechism and the manuals could operate.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

2.3. 1917 Code of Canon Law in relation to suicide.

The issue of suicide is one, which has featured in canon law ever since the earliest attempts to codify the law of the church. Gratian in his *Decretum* addresses the problem of one taking one's life. Without an explicit order or permit of a divine nature; this for him constitutes a mortal sin. We see here in Gratian the adopting of a position of Augustine in *De civitate Dei* 26, that death from suicide leads to excommunication and hence the burial is carried out in unconsecrated ground.¹⁴²

This theme is carried over from the *Decretals*, which forbid the burial of Christians who had taken their lives. It deals with the topic when contrasting a man who fell off a bridge in contrast to, a man who threw himself from a bridge deliberately. The former would receive a Christian burial whereas the latter would not, as excommunication was presumed. If burial had occurred prior to this knowledge then the body would be exhumed.¹⁴³ Hence we can see even in these early stages of the formulation of a code of canon law the harsh judgements and penalties imposed on the suicide are rooted in the fifth commandment.

¹⁴² Schrage, E., "Suicide in Canon Law" *The Journal of Legal History*, 21 No. 1 (2000), p. 61. The excerpt is taken from; Gratian, *Decretum* C. 23 q. 5. c. 12 "Placuit ut qui sibi ipsis voluntarie aut per ferrum, aut per venenum, aut per praecipitium, aut per suspendium vel quolibet modo violentam ingerunt mortem nulla prorsus pro illis in oblatione commemoratio fiat: neque cum psalmis ad sepulturam eorum cadavera deducantur. Multi enim sibi hoc per ignorantiam usurpant. Similiter et de his placuit fieri qui pro suis sceleribus puniuntur."

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 61. This passage was taken from the *Decretals*, vide X.3.28 (*de sepulturis*) "Sacris est canonibus institutum, ut quibus non communicavimus vivos, non communicemus defunctis, et ut careant ecclesiastica sepultura, qui prius errant ab ecclesiastica unitate praecisi, nec in articulis mortis ecclesiae reconciliati fuerint. Unde si contingat inteeerdum, quod vel excommunicatorum corpora per violentiam aliquorum, ve alio casu in coemeterio ecclesiastico tumulentur, si ab alio corporibus discerni poterunt, exhumari debent et procul ab ecclesiastica sepultura iactri"

This position was to hold, and is evident in the 1917 code. We see the 1917 code deal with the issue of suicide in some detail in a number of its canons. First reference is made to it in canon 940, which deals with the issue of extreme unction.¹⁴⁴ The notable reference in this canon are “in danger of death through sickness or old age.” So what of a person who has attempted suicide. Woywod would claim that if the person having “endangered one’s life by wound or poison or other injury to the body, may be anointed if penitent.”¹⁴⁵

The eventuality of the person being unconscious on the arrival of the priest is dealt with in canon 942.¹⁴⁶ There is a clarification to this in the next canon¹⁴⁷ from which we can deduct that if repentance was not evident, or the life lived was one in which the “neglect of one’s spiritual duties was so pronounced that the priest has no reason at all for believing it likely that he would have asked for the Sacrament before he became unconscious, he may not give him Extreme Unction even conditionally.”¹⁴⁸

The act of suicide is seen as an act against the law and as such punishments are imposed in the form of Irregularities, which are “those canonical impediments which permanently bar a man from entering the clerical state or forbid him exercise orders already

¹⁴⁴ “Extreme unction can be given only to a catholic who, after having attained the use of reason, incurs a danger of death through sickness or old age. In the same illness this sacrament cannot be repeated, unless the sick person rallied after the reception of the last anointing and his illness again becomes critical” (Canon 940).

¹⁴⁵ Woywod, S., *A Practical commentary on the code of Canon Law Vol. I.*, (New York: J.F. Wagner Inc., 1932), p. 479.

¹⁴⁶ “This Sacrament is not to be administered to those who obstinately and impenitently persevere in open mortal sin; if this is doubtful, they may be anointed conditionally.

¹⁴⁷ “Sick persons who, while they were still conscious asked for the Sacrament at least implicitly, or who very likely would have asked for it, may be anointed absolutely though they have lost consciousness or the use of reason.” Canon 943.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 482.

conferred.”¹⁴⁹ These can arise out of a defect, or from a crime. In the case of attempted suicide it is an irregularity from crime. We see in canon 985,§5 “Men who have mutilated themselves or others, or have attempted suicide”¹⁵⁰ fall under the remit of this canon’s impediment. The condition for this irregularity to be imposed, are given in canon 986.¹⁵¹ From this we see that a suicide attempted deliberately and with full knowledge induces irregularity.

From the reading of this code an irregularity will not be imposed in the case where preparations have been made and the intent to commit suicide is declared, but the act is not carried out, as this does not in itself constitute an attempt. For it to be seen as an attempt the code demands that “a further act tending proximately to the accomplishment of the crime is necessary to constitute attempted suicide.”¹⁵² This is based on the definitions given in canon 2212, which gives account of what is meant by an attempted crime, and in canon 2213, which gives account of when an attempted crime is not imputable.

On this point we see another clarification as canon 2213 treats the issue of liability in the external forum as opposed to the forum of conscience. This could lead to the result of a person been guilty in conscience before God while not having gone so far to violate the law itself. For example the preparation accompanied with the statement of intent, does

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 522.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 528.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 529. “These offences do not cause irregularity unless they are mortal sins, committed after baptism (except in the case of canon 985, n.2) and unless they are external, whether public or occult.”

¹⁵² Woywod, S., *A Practical commentary on the code of Canon Law Vol. 1.*, (New York: J.F. Wagner Inc., 1932), p. 533.

not fall under the remit of the law as it would not qualify as an actual attempted suicide in legal terms but in conscience that same person might be guilty. Here we see that the code is quite clear as to what constitutes suicide and attempted suicide. This clarity is important as the conclusions reached carry grave consequences.

We see in canon 2212 that “when the attempt of a crime is visited in law with a special penalty, the offence constitutes a true offence.”¹⁵³ Put simply:

An attempted offence induces liability which increases in proportion as it approaches nearer to the consummation of the offence, although the liability is always less than for the consummated offence. A frustrated offence is more culpable than a simple attempted offence.¹⁵⁴

We see in canon 2350, §2¹⁵⁵ that an attempted suicide is an attempt which carries penalties. What is of note here is that the code does not inflict a penalty *latae sententiae*¹⁵⁶ on suicide or attempted suicide. Final judgement on the act is committed to the respective Ordinary. From this account we see that while the punishments imposed are quite harsh, i.e. the denial of the privilege of a Christian burial and all that goes with it, such as funeral offices or services, there is included in the process a number of checks and

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 500.

¹⁵⁴ Canon 2213, Woywod, S., *A Practical commentary on the code of Canon Law Vol. II*, (New York: J.F. Wagner Inc., 1932), p. 411.

¹⁵⁵ “Persons who lay hands on themselves shall, if death ensues, be deprived of ecclesiastical burial in accordance with the precept of Canon 1240, n3. If they do not die, they shall be barred from legal ecclesiastical action, and, if they are clerics, they shall be suspended for a period of time to be determined by the Ordinary, and deprived of benefices of office to which the care of souls in either the internal or external forum is attached.” Canon 2350, §2.

¹⁵⁶ This is “if a specific penalty is attached to a law or a precept in such a manner that it is incurred *ipso facto* by the commission of the offence” Woywod, S., *A Practical commentary on the code of Canon Law Vol. I.*, (New York: J.F. Wagner Inc., 1932), p. 413.

counter checks.¹⁵⁷ The final such check is seen in Canon 1240, which ends by stating, if there is any doubt then even after consulting with the ordinary burial shall be granted but in such a manner that scandal is avoided.

The key concern here seems to be the avoidance of scandal. Woywod, while commenting on canon 1240, claims that this notoriety comes in two forms firstly, notoriety of fact and secondly, notoriety of law. But the problem in the case of suicide is that the code does not state that the offence must be publicly known. This could leave room for an interpretation of the code resulting in two different outcomes, acceptance in one case while refusal of a petition for burial in a different but similar case. Here Woywod claims that n. 6 seems to indicate that these offences must be notorious before one is deprived of ecclesiastical burial. Coupled with this “notoriety will be rare, and scandal unlikely, where the more or less common opinion prevails that suicide usually results from nervous or mental derangement.”¹⁵⁸

This he claims is supported by canon 2232 which lays down as a general principle:

That any penalty inflicted by the law itself does not oblige the person to undergo the penalty, unless the offence is notorious; if it is not notorious the penalty cannot be urged except after a declaratory sentence of the competent authority.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ Canon 1240, §1,3. This reads “Person guilty of deliberate suicide.”

¹⁵⁸ Bouscaren, T., & Ellis, A., *Canon Law a text and commentary*, (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1946), p. 624.

¹⁵⁹ Woywod, S., *A Practical commentary on the code of Canon Law Vol. II*, (New York: J.F. Wagner Inc., 1932), p. 48.

This declaratory sentence when issued has a retroactive effect to the moment when, the offence was committed. Bouscaren holds a similar view, while Eills claims that evidence of a sign of repentance seem to be more tangible yard stick on which to assess a given case. Whatever the method it must be remembered that if there is doubt in favour of the deceased then all decisions should be in his/her favour.¹⁶⁰

In the case of an attempted suicide on the part of a layperson we see the denial of all ecclesiastical legal acts while in the case of clerics they are to be suspended for as long a period as the Ordinary deems fit, and must be “deprived of any benefice or office to which a care of souls is attached, both in the internal and external forum.”¹⁶¹ It must be noted that such penalties are not inflicted if the suicide occurs by chance or if the subject is unbalanced. According to canon 2200, §2 any unsoundness of mind is not to be presumed, although in cases of doubt as to the state of mind of the person concerned or where there is doubt as to the cause of the death the balance is always in favour of the victim.

From this we can see that the formulation finally arrived at in the 1917 code was one, which was in keeping with the traditions of Church Law, but also one, which was in keeping with the theology of the time. While the law was harsh it was also very tight in its definitions and contained many checks and balances which served to protect the place of

¹⁶⁰ Bouscaren, T., & Ellis, A., *Canon Law a text and commentary*, (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1946), p. 625.

¹⁶¹ Roca, F.D., *Manual of Canon Law*, (tr.), Thatcher, A., (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing company, 1959), p. 594. Look also at Canon 2350, §2 in the 1917 code.

the victim when doubt remained. The fact still remained that burial was refused because of the law.

2.4. Liturgical Practice.

We see in the liturgical practices of the church before the Vatican Council a tangible expression of the 1917 Code and its refusal of burial to those who took their own lives. The liturgy expressed in practice, that which was stated in the law.

We see in the funeral liturgical practices an outlook, which was a remnant of a middle age perspective of “suffrage and absolution.”¹⁶² The absolution, which was the final part of the funeral rite, paralleled that of the absolution one received at confession. In short the powers that the priest had over the soul while they lived was much the same over the souls of the dead. Power, claims that “the priest’s application of Christ’s merits and satisfaction through the mass to the souls of the deceased was understood to be an exercise of ecclesiastical power, extending even beyond the grave.”¹⁶³ While some did question whether this had an “efficacy comparable to the *ex opere operato* of the sacraments or was it to be understood as a plea in Christ’s name to God’s mercy”¹⁶⁴ Yet the practice continued.

This was a framework, which rested secure on a firm understanding of the cosmos. Power develops this by claiming that it rested on the presumption that knowledge of the after

¹⁶² Power, D., “The funeral rites for a suicide and Liturgical Developments” *Concilium*, 179, (Edinburgh: T&T Clarke LTD., 1985), p. 76.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

life could be based on knowledge of this life. He sees this expressed most clearly in the divisions of grace, venial sin and mortal sin being paralleled by the divisions of the after life into heaven, hell and purgatory. The harmonising or bonding agent between the church's ruling, and that of God's was found in scripture "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven. Whatsoever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven".

The church's moral teaching held that very same certainty. Whatever excluded a person from the church's life while alive excluded them from burial when dead. Now we see the mindset behind the teaching and the liturgical practice. When one succeeded in taking one's life "the Church judged the person unable to be helped any further by its ministry. To pronounce absolution over the coffin, or to apply the merits of the mass to such a person would have belied the Church's securities."¹⁶⁵ Scandal was to be avoided.

As we have journeyed through this period prior to the Vatican council we see that the codification, which was begun in the early church councils was continued and developed. The structure rested on an interpretation of the early fathers and scriptures, which longed for certainty and security. The manuals formed the priests in this certainty of an answer for every question. The lay people were given a similar training with the catechism yet all the while the why of suicide called for something more. While specific cases were looked over and the reason of death covered up so that full privileges could be granted the fear of possible exclusion was real which added to the taboo. Where the law was applied the liturgy was the place where cold teaching pierced most deeply the tenderness of human

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

experience as exclusion was institutionalised outside the walls of the cemetery. And all the while the Code held it all together.

Chapter 3: Suicide in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council.

After Pope John the XXIII called the second Vatican Council the winds of change soon began to blow through the church and the area of moral was to be no exception. The “*aggiornamento*” which was called for with this council, did bring about a re-look firstly, at how the Church saw herself and secondly, the manner in which she presented herself and interacted with the world. This new vision was captured in *Gaudium et Spes* when it stated:

The Church safeguards the deposit of God’s Word, from which religious and moral principles are drawn. But it does not always have a ready answer to individual questions, and it wishes to combine the light of revelation with the experience of everyone in order to illuminate the road on which humanity has recently set out.¹⁶⁶

The moral endeavour was no more seen as an isolated science but a “derivative science, which is dependent on other branches of theology, notably biblical studies and dogmatic theology.”¹⁶⁷ This was to express itself in a drive towards seeing things in their totality, and the acceptance of diversity. No longer was morality about isolated units of our lives but it was about the whole of the person encountering the whole of theology.

This new interdependence was to have a knock on effect on all areas of theology. The new code of canon law which was seen as the closing chapter of the Council, showed developments in regards to how the law of the Church saw suicide. The new catechism was to hold that objectively suicide was wrong while at the same time giving room to the subjective elements which gave space for the expressing hope. The Church documents

¹⁶⁶ Mahoney, J., *The Making of Moral Theology, a study of the Roman Catholic Tradition*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. 303. This is also found in, Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 33.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 307.

echoed this and called for a collective effort on the part of the Church to work against this “culture of death”. A re-look at the Scriptures showed that there was more than condemnation in relation to suicide to be found in the bible. In the bible there was also found accounts of suicide, which expressed suicide as a sad reality of the brokenness of life, but saw no need for condemnation. Finally, all this change was to express itself in the life of the Church and her liturgy.

3.1. 1983 Code of Canon Law.

When Pope John’s XXIII called for a revision of the code it was seen by many as just a little bit of “legal housekeeping”¹⁶⁸ independent of the council. With time this outlook changed, as there was a move away from the idea of refinement to one of reform. The *aggiornamento* of the council was to take effect on the code of canon law. Due to the size of the task the commission for looking at the code did not officially begin their work until 20th of November 1965 nearing the end of the council. Now that the council had formulated a new pastoral praxis there was a need for a new legal framework for its implementation. John Paul II when talking about the new code claimed, “the Council is of the greatest importance for our theme and is closely linked with its substance.”¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁸ Alesandro, A., “The revision of the Code of Canon Law: a background study”, *Studia Canonica*, 24 (1990), p. 92.

¹⁶⁹ John Paul II, “Apostolic Constitution” found in *Code of Canon Law*, (London: Harper Collins, 1997), p. xi.

This brought a shift from the experience of the formulation of the 1917 code as now:

The 'canonical *aggiornamento*' depended essentially on the framework of the pastoral *aggiornamento*' sought by the Conciliar documents. The Code was not primarily influencing the Council; the position was reversed: the Council was primarily influencing the Code.¹⁷⁰

From this we can see that the new code would be different in both content and style.

When looking at the code of 1917 we saw suicide mentioned in relation to orders, burial, the sacraments, and membership of the Church. Changes did occur in the new code in relation to the sacrament of Orders. We see the introduction of the permanent diaconate, and of most interest to our current study we see the simplifying of the law on irregularities and impediments.

Irregularities by delict are now limited to five categories and included in this there is attempted suicide. Canon 1041, states that "[the following persons are irregular for the reception of orders:] 5° one who has gravely and maliciously mutilated himself or another, or who has attempted suicide."¹⁷¹ However a bishop may if he deems fit give dispensation for the reception of Orders.¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

¹⁷¹ *The Code of Canon Law*, (London: Harper Collins Ltd., 1997), p. 233.

¹⁷² Griffin, B. J., "Sacrament of orders" found in Provost, J., (ed.), *Code, Community, Ministry, selected Studies for the parish minister introducing the revised code of canon law*. (Washington: Canon Law Society of America, 1983), p. 98.



It is in the necessity of such dispensations that we see a difference with the 1917 code. New qualifications have been put in place in the 1983 code, which limit the necessity for a dispensation. If it is a case that suicide has been attempted through mutilation, then it must be deemed grave or “malicious”. This means that it can be interpreted “if an individual attempted suicide but did not sin gravely because of a mental disorder or lack of full use of reason at the time, he did not incur the irregularity.”¹⁷³ This leaves the way open for somebody who attempted suicide under these conditions to go forward for orders. Notwithstanding this it has to be said that a diocesan bishop or a religious ordinary may still judge a person who has attempted suicide or mutilated themselves not suitable and hence they should not be put forward for orders and this is quite within the law according to canon 1052,§3.

In connection with this canon 1041 one commentary raises an important question:

This commentator judges that the problem with reality perception and depression which affects persons who mutilate themselves or others or who have attempted suicide suggests that the issue be addressed in connection with the first category in this canon – insanity or psychic defect. The problem is psychological and should be dealt with in a psychological context.¹⁷⁴

In short, this canon would be better placed under the first part of this canon?¹⁷⁵

¹⁷³ Woestman, W., *The Sacrament of Orders and the Clerical State*, (Ottawa: The faculty of Canon Law St. Paul University, 1999), p. 70.

¹⁷⁴ Coriden, J.A., et al eds. *The Code of Canon Law: a text and commentary*, (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1985), p. 730.

¹⁷⁵ This same point is made in: J.P. Beal et al. (eds.), *New Commentary of the Code of Canon Law*, (USA: Paulist Press, 2000), p. 1218.

There seems to be a different rationale at work here when contrasted to the assessment on whether somebody should receive a Christian burial which is rooted in the “presumed incapability, rooted in personal incapacity, temporary or permanent.”¹⁷⁶ For pastoral praxis and for a closer connection with the reality of the condition it might be more beneficial both for the candidate and the Church to see the issue dealt with under section one of this canon.¹⁷⁷

From this we see that modifications have been made in the redrafting of the 1983 code. Coupled with this we see that while somethings have been modified others have taken a turn about, while other legislation has been dropped. This is brought to light in an article entitled “From Prohibited to Permitted” which states in one of its conclusions that:

Several of the former Code’s prohibitions have been suppressed; some have been changed completely, so that an opposite principle now operates; and others have been altered somewhat by the provision of a permission or other kind of flexibility – although conditionally framed.¹⁷⁸

One such example of this is seen in regards to suicide and ecclesiastical burial. As we have seen in the 1917 code, suicides were listed as people to whom an ecclesiastical burial should be refused.¹⁷⁹ The corresponding canon, 1184, in the 1983 code does not mention suicides.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 730.

¹⁷⁷ Canon 1041, 1° [The following are irregular as regards the reception of orders] 1° a person who labours under some form of insanity or other psychic defect due to which, after consultation with experts, he is judged incapable of rightly carrying out ministry.

¹⁷⁸ Koury, J.J., “From prohibition to permitted: Transition in the Code of Canon Law”, found in Morrissey, F., *Studia Canonica Vol.24/1*, (Ottawa: Faculty of Canon Law St. Paul University, 1990), p. 156.

¹⁷⁹ Canon 1240, § 1 of the 1917 Code.

This is a definite change in law which is not a case of changing the law through legal loopholes, but a case of new canons coupled with a stricter mode of interpretation. Koury points out that this strict interpretation is needed in order to employ true justice which was rarely carried out in the past. When assessing a case of suicide the question must be asked, did the persons death correspond to the definition as given in the code, a deliberate act of a reasonable person? For Koury “unfortunately, that rule of interpretation was too often ignored in practice”¹⁸⁰ When it does occur the law sees a distinction between people who took their lives for whatever reason and those who actually committed suicide as defined in the Law. While their exclusion is noticeable they could still fall under part three of canon 1184§1,3°. It is a shift from guilt by presumption to innocent until proven guilty.

All the time suicide is seen in the strict definition of the term where by the person is in full knowledge and in full freedom at the time of them taking their lives, and in these cases the Church holds firm in opposition to the practice of direct suicide. It is noticeable that while the new code does uphold this teaching, its reform with the Vatican Council does show a more pastoral approach. This is evident in the change of emphases in regard to burial and orders and the pastoral judgement of the Bishop in evaluating these issues. Here we see an effort to uphold Church law while displaying the maximum “Christian charity and understanding towards human weakness.”¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

¹⁸¹ Blazquez, N., “The Church’s Traditional Moral Teaching on Suicide” (tr.) Burns, P., found in *Concilium*, 179, p. 73.

In conclusion it might be helpful to cite a section from a private letter dated 1973 of the Sacred Congregation for the doctrine of the Faith on the burial of Catholics in irregular marriages. While the topic is not connected to our current study the same rationale might be useful in the pastoral context in regard to the burial of suicides, who are members of the Christian community:

The celebration of religious obsequies will not be prohibited for the faithful who, although finding themselves before death in a situation of manifest sin, have preserved their attachment to the Church and have given some sign of penitence and on condition that public scandal on the part of other members of the faithful has been removed. ... In the meantime, scandal on the part of the faithful or of the ecclesiastical community will be able to be lessened or avoided to the extent that pastors will explain the viewpoint which befits the meaning of Christian obsequies and in which many see an appeal to the mercy of God....¹⁸²

3.2. The New Catechism of the Catholic Church and suicide

Like the 1983 Code of Canon Law the new Catechism was to be written through the eyes of the Vatican Council. The idea to set about the task was due in part to a proposed plan by Cardinal Bernard Law, when he called for the formulation of a “conciliar Catechism.”¹⁸³ It was hoped that it would answer the question of the post Vatican world and Church, just as the Trent catechism did for a former world and theological view.

¹⁸² SCDF, private letter, May 29, 1973, reported in CLD 8, 862-863, found in Coriden, J.A., et al eds. *The Code of Canon Law: a text and commentary*, (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1985), p.840.

¹⁸³ Marthaler, B., *The Catechism Yesterday and Today: the evolution of a Genre*, (Minnesota, The Liturgical Press, 1995), p. 132.

So how did this new catechism address the reality of suicide as experienced in the Church in this new age? Not surprisingly it is dealt with under the section regarding the Fifth Commandment and respect for human life. Immediately we see that the Catechism uses arguments, which are well established in the Church tradition and ones, which have their roots as far back as the Church Fathers.

God as the sovereign of life and that we are stewards not owners of this gift is the form that the first argument against suicide takes. The obligation is on humanity to “accept life gratefully and preserve it for his honour 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.”¹⁸⁴ We did not decide when we came into being and likewise we do not have the authority to decide when our lives should end, this belongs to God.

In the next section the arguments against suicide are very much a variation of themes set out by Aquinas. Suicide is an offence against self, community and God. It goes against the natural inclinations of the human being to “preserve and perpetuate his life. It is gravely contrary to the just life of self.” It goes on to state that it offends the love of neighbour “because it unjustly breaks the ties of solidarity with family, nation and other human societies to which we continue to have obligation.” And finally it concludes by stating, “it is contrary to love for the living God.”¹⁸⁵ The catechism does raise new

¹⁸⁴ John Paul II, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (Dublin: Veritas, 1994), p. 491. Otherwise cited CCC. 2280.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 491. CCC. 2281.

motives, which do add to the gravity of the sin. If the suicide is committed with the aim of setting an example “it takes on the gravity of scandal.”¹⁸⁶

The charge has been levelled that the moral teaching in the Catechism deals predominantly with the “objective”¹⁸⁷ aspects of the moral life and little if any time is given to the “subjective.” Thankfully its teaching on suicide is one of the exceptions to prove the rule. Having dealt with suicide from an objective viewpoint we see the Catechism change in tone and outlook. This occurs when it looks at the subjective case and states, “Grave psychological disturbances, anguish or grave fear of hardship, suffering or torture can diminish the responsibility of one committing suicide.”¹⁸⁸ Now we see the distilling of the objective and the subjective teaching, a development, which has become more evident since the Vatican council.

The seeds of hope are sown and are continually fostered when the Catechism 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 Christian should never despair or put limits on the grace of God, to him everything is possible. This is probably one of the most hope filled comments made by the church in regards to suicide and the possibility of salvation. This is developed and anchored when

¹⁸⁶ CCC. 2282: later CCC. 2284 defines scandal very simply as “an attitude or behaviour, which leads another to do evil.”

¹⁸⁷ Harrington, D., “Morality and the Catechism” found in, Devitt, P., (ed.), *Companion to the Catechism: a readers guide*, (Dublin: Veritas, 1995), p. 67. Similar examples are found in Selling, J., “You shall love your neighbour: commandments 4-10” found in Walsh, J., *Commentary on the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), p. 371ff.

¹⁸⁸ CCC. 2282.

the catechism states, "The Church prays for persons who have taken their own lives."¹⁸⁹ This is a far cry from the canonical and liturgical norms of the pre Vatican Church which, denied burial and the early Councils of the Church which went so far as to deny the praying of the psalms at the burial of a suicide. Now we pray, and the Christian community prays because she believes that there is hope. This shows that while they do initiate their own death there is still eschatological significance to the soul of the deceased, even if this did come about through suicide. This is one of the first truly hope filled teachings of the Church in regards to suicide. While stating that objectively it is always wrong, subjectively there is hope.

In conclusion it could be stated that the catechism does resort to very traditional arguments as regards suicide being always objectively wrong. It does however show ingenuity in how it introduces a note of hope as regards the mercy of God and the eschatological prospects of those who do take their lives. While their lives may be lost their souls are in the hand of God, a God we believe to be merciful, and so we have good reason to pray for suicides.

¹⁸⁹ CCC. 2283.

3.3. Church Documents

The protection and promotion of life is a recurrent theme within church teaching. We see in this teaching the constant reaffirming of the sanctity of life. It is an argument, which she has held in all ages and for every stage and condition of the human person. While no one document is devoted solely to the issue of suicide it does receive treatment in some Church documents both in a direct and indirect fashion.

Crimes against life were condemned by the Council and numbered among them was wilful suicide, “The varieties of crime are numerous: all offences against life itself, such as murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia and wilful suicide: ...”¹⁹⁰ These were and are issues which the Church will return again and again to.

On the 18th of November 1974 *Declaration on Procured Abortion*¹⁹¹ was issued. Having dealt with the issue of abortion in relation to the light of reason and the light of faith the document then goes on to reply to some objection. One such objection which is raised is that of the future unhappiness of the child due to the circumstances into which he/she is born into. To the document replies that, “no one, not even the father or mother, can act as its substitute, even if is still in the embryonic stage, to choose in the child’s name, life or death.”

¹⁹⁰ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 7 December, 1965; found in Flannery, A., (ed.), *Vatican Council II, the conciliar and post conciliar documents*, (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1987), p. 928.

¹⁹¹ S.C.D.F., *Quaestio de abortu*, 18 November, 1974; found in Flannery, A., (ed.), *Vatican Council II, more post conciliar documents Vol. 2*, (New York: Costello Publishing Company, 1982), p. 441-453.

The document goes on “the child itself, when grown up, will never have the right to choose suicide; no more may his parents choose death for the child while it is not of an age to decide for itself.”¹⁹²

Behind this condemnation of suicide we see the age-old arguments of an offence against, both the natural and divine law. What is of interest is the closing line of this paragraph which states “Life is too fundamental a value to be weighed against even very serious disadvantage.”¹⁹³ This stands in regard to decisions vis-à-vis abortion but also as regard suicide. This is of interest as it is often out of a situation of disadvantage be it monetary, psychological, emotional, or low self esteem, that suicide is carried out. Does such a distinction make void the distinction between objective and subjective, which we saw in the catechism? Does it act against the possibility or relevance of diminished or lack of responsibility for the act? To see it as such would firstly, be a misunderstanding of the principles of fundamentals of moral teaching, and secondly, would cause us to miss out on a more profound invitation. It is a call for the Christian not to pit the cross of suffering and disadvantage against the fundamental value of life.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 446.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 446.

Suicide is again mentioned in the *Declaration on Euthanasia*.¹⁹⁴ It is averted to indirectly when the document states, “Everyone has the duty to lead his or her life in accordance with God’s plan. That life is entrusted to the individual as a good that must bear fruit already here on earth, but that finds its full perfection only in eternal life.”¹⁹⁵

This is developed in the next section when it states:

Intentionally causing one’s own death, or suicide, is therefore equally as wrong as murder; such an action on the part of a person is to be considered as a rejection of God’s sovereignty and loving plan. Furthermore, suicide is also often a refusal of love of self, the denial of the natural instinct to live, a flight from the duties of justice and charity owed to one’s neighbour, to various communities or to the whole of society ...¹⁹⁶

In many ways we see here a restating of a position we saw earlier in our study, that of Aquinas who saw suicide as a sin against God, self and community.

The word “intentionally” is important both in the point made but also in the conclusions reached when they claim “although, as is generally recognized, at times there are psychological factors present that can diminish responsibility or even completely remove it”¹⁹⁷ This document makes one further distinction, one which we have not seen since our treatment of the early Church. Here it states “However, one must clearly distinguish suicide from that sacrifice of one’s life whereby for a higher cause, such as God’s glory,

¹⁹⁴ S.C.D.F., *Jura et bona*, 5 May, 1980; found in Flannery, A., *Vatican Council II, more post conciliar documents Vol. 2*, (New York: Costello Publishing Company, 1982), p. 510-517.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 511.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 512.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 512.

the salvation of souls or the service of one's brethren, a person offers his or her own life or puts it in danger (cf. *Jn* 15:14)."¹⁹⁸

For the current pontiff Pope John Paul the issue of the dignity of human person and human life have been themes, which have been central themes through much of his writings and his theology. This expressed itself most clearly in his encyclical letter *Evangelium Vitae*. While this document deals mostly with the issue of abortion and of euthanasia he does devote some time to the issue of suicide. It deals directly with the issue in section 66 and indirectly in his thought on the sanctity of human life but also in relation to the communities responsibility to support life. Let us begin by looking at the documents direct reference to suicide.

Here again we see little change or development in the presentation of the teaching. We see it outlined that from an objective point of view "suicide is always as objectionable as murder. The Church's tradition has always rejected it as a gravely evil choice."¹⁹⁹ Later in the same section he states "suicide, when viewed objectively, is a gravely immoral act." Again we see the church adopt the teaching of Aquinas when it states:

It involves the rejection of love of self and the renunciation of the obligation of justice and charity towards one's neighbour, towards the communities to which one belongs, and towards society as a whole. In its deepest reality, suicide represents a rejection of God's absolute sovereignty over life and death, ...²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 512.

¹⁹⁹ John Paul, *Evangelium Vitae*, (Dublin: Veritas Publication, 1995), p. 119.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

The subjective nature of suicide is also addressed. “Even though a certain psychological, cultural and social conditioning may induce a person to carry out an action which so radically contradicts the innate inclination to life, thus lessening or removing subjective responsibility, ...”²⁰¹ The psychological has long been accepted and outlined as a factor which leads to a diminished or a total lack of responsibility but the introduction of “cultural and social conditioning” is a development, which in today’s culture carries some weight. This is reinforced when the Pope has made reference to this culture being a “culture of death.” Reference is made again to this point when he states:

Decisions that go against life sometimes arise from difficult or even tragic situations of profound suffering, loneliness, a total lack of economic prospects, depression and anxiety about the future. Such circumstances can mitigate even to a notable degree subjective responsibility and the consequent culpability of those who make choices which in themselves are evil.²⁰²

Does this leave the way open to drop yet another taboo surrounding the subject of suicide. Now one need not be deemed suffering from some mental illness to fall under the category of diminished responsibility. One can and could be unduly influenced by ones cultural milieu, and hence take a mistaken position. The influences of ones culture, both in what it values, and what it contains does influence in trivial matters, but also in more serious matters such as life and death.

There is another element raised in this encyclical related to the topic and to the pastoral life of the Church, that being the question raised by Cain, “Am I my brothers keeper?” This he sees most evident in our “lack of solidarity towards societies weakest

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p.120.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 30.

members.”²⁰³ I do not raise this to further increase the feeling of guilt which, is often felt, by immediate family and friends when they wonder what they might have done, I raise it to highlight responsibility of the Church as the people of God to engender solidarity in a way where all belong. To avoid the situation where members of this body are “left alone with their problems ... make the choice to defend and promote life so demanding as sometimes to reach the point of heroism.”²⁰⁴ Weighed under such pressure he ventures to claim, “this explains, at least in part, how the value of life can today undergo a kind of ‘eclipse’. And eclipse is a good description for the darkness that can overcome somebody before suicide.

Now we see the mission or pastoral praxis arises out of this reality of despair. Solidarity is needed with the weak and the oppressed which expresses itself in “an absolute imperative to respect, love and promote the life of every brother and sister, in accordance with the requirements of God’s bountiful love in Jesus Christ ... It is not only a personal but a social concern which we must all foster.”²⁰⁵ It was once stated in relation to AIDS that “the body of Christ has AIDS” now we can state that the body of Christ commits suicide. Which makes us employ the theology of St. Paul; one body with many parts.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

3.4 Funeral Liturgy

We have seen how the Vatican Council had an effect on the discipline of moral theology and as a result on canon law, the catechism and official church documents. Liturgy was to be no exception. For many the most tangible evidence of change brought about by the Council was experienced in liturgy.

The central core of this change is captured in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* when it states, “Funeral rites should express more clearly the paschal character of Christian death, and should correspond more closely to the circumstances and traditions found in various regions. This also applies to the liturgical colours used.”²⁰⁶ It goes on to state a point, though not directly related does show that there was a definite change in outlook. “The rite for the Burial of Infants is to be revised, and a special Mass for the occasion should be provided.”²⁰⁷ This shows that groups for whom certain practices were not held were to experience a change and Mass was now not only a possibility but a central element in remembering the unbaptised dead.

²⁰⁶ Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, (4 December, 1963), Sec. 81 found in Flannery, A., (ed.), *Vatican Council, the conciliar and post conciliar documents*, (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1987), p. 24.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

The victims of suicides were to experience a similar change in treatment, in part due to the influences of the changes already noted in Canon Law and moral theology but also a change in how the funeral rite were viewed. In the new rite, prayers for the deceased are of central importance but so too is ministering to those who mourn. We see in this rite that:

The celebration of the Christian funeral brings hope and consolation to the living. While proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ and witnessing to Christian hope in the resurrection, the funeral rites also recall to all who take part in them God's mercy and judgement and meet the human need to turn always to God in times of crisis.²⁰⁸

From this we see that in the case of a suicide the celebration of the funeral rites is not a moral evaluation on the rightness or wrongness of suicide but is the Church's way of commending one of her community to the mercy of God, and to keep burning within the faithful the ember of hope which characterises Christian faith in a God of infinite mercy.

This is further signified in the introduction of the *Rite of Committal*, which replaces the *absolution*, which was part of the old rite. Importance is now attached to the community in an "act of respect for one of their members, whom they entrusting to the tender and merciful embrace of God." The rite is conclude by a prayer of commendation in which the community call upon God's mercy, "commends the deceased into God's hands, and affirms its belief that those who have died in Christ will share in Christ's victory over death."²⁰⁹

²⁰⁸ Catholic Bishop's Conference, *Order of Christian funerals*, (Dublin: Veritas, 1991), p. 4

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

This is the most notable change; suicides are afforded the same privileges as the rest of the community. This is demonstrated mostly fully when we look at Part III of the new rite with its additional texts. Included here are prayers for those who have died of suicide. While some of the prayers found in this section are just a translation of prayers found in the Latin rite some are new compositions, and it is under this category that the two prayers for suicides fall.²¹⁰

Contained in these prayers is a major change in outlook and understanding. Now not only may a mass be said for a suicide, but now the Church acknowledges suicide as part of the reality and brokenness of life and answers the invitation of the Catechism to pray for those who die as a result of suicide. These prayers contain all the wishes and hopes that the community would have for any of its members, and as such we see the suicide as still a member of this broken body, the Church. Those left behind in loss are also acknowledged by entrusting the deceased into the care of God the merciful Father. No judgement is made but faith professed in the “paschal character of Christian death”²¹¹

²¹⁰ Following is the wording of the two prayers, which were found in; Catholic Bishops Conferences, *Order of Christian Funerals*, (Dublin: Veritas, 1991), p. 189.

(37), God the lover of souls, you hold dear what you have made and spare all things for they are yours. Look gently on your servant N., and by the blood of the cross forgive his/her sins and failings.

Remember the faith of those who mourn and satisfy their longing for that day when all will be made new again in Christ, our risen Lord, who lives and reigns with you for ever and ever. Amen.

(38), Almighty God and Father of all, you strengthen us by the mystery of the cross and with the sacrament of your Son's resurrection. Have mercy on our brother/sister N.

Forgive all his/her sins and grant him her peace, May we who mourn this sudden death be comforted and consoled by your power and protection. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

²¹¹ Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, (4 December, 1963), Sec. 81 found in Flannery, A., (ed.), *Vatican Council, the conciliar and post conciliar documents*, (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1987), p.

3.5 Lessons from Scripture

This leaves only one final section of the Tradition of the church, scripture. In this regard the tradition has been very selective in its choice of texts. While scripture has been cited namely the account of the fifth commandment as sited in Deuteronomy little if any time is given to the account of suicide in the bible. This is evident from the time of the fathers right up to present day, little mention is made of the accounts of suicide, which are made in the bible and are part of our tradition. The prohibition against suicide is always put under the umbrella of the fifth commandment and as such an act against the designed will of God. But a quick survey of both the Old and New Testament show that there are accounts of actual suicides in Scripture.

In these accounts one's death is seen as a means of escape and salvation from the enemy. This is a reversal of the more common biblical presentation that it is through the death of the enemy that salvation is gained. This leaves us to look at the bible for examples where death "though evil is desired as an escape from a greater evil."²¹²

One of the first examples (albeit more akin to assisted suicide) in scripture is that of Abimelech who called on his armour bearer to kill him so as to avoid the claim being made that he had been killed, by a woman who threw a millstone on his head.²¹³ It turns out that this was all in vain since we see Joab cites him as having died at a woman's hand in 2 Sam 11:21.²¹⁴ We could read into this event not so much that death is preferable to

²¹² Daube, D., "Death as a release in the Bible", *Novum Testamentum*, vol. 5, 1962, p. 83.

²¹³ Judges 9:53-54.

²¹⁴ Brown, R., et al. eds., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, (Bath: Geoffrey Chapman, 1990), p. 140.

disgrace but that “to die at once, honourably, is better than to die shortly, in an abject manner.”²¹⁵

Saul’s death seems to present us with a similar scenario albeit transmitted in three different accounts or versions. The first account tells how he killed himself by falling on the point of his sword to avoid the claim that he was killed by an uncircumcised.²¹⁶ What he feared was the cruel and mocking manner by which he might die. This was to result in what today would be termed “copycat suicides” as his armour bearer followed suite. As in the case of Abimelech the choice was taken for similar reasons “not between death and a dishonourable life, but between an honourable death at once and an unbearable one in a few moments.”²¹⁷

It must not be overlooked but the armour bearer also took his life and according to Daube, not for the same reasons, as he would have been treated as any soldier and might even have escaped any punishment hence he chose death in preference to life. There is an account of the same event found in Chronicles, which is quite similar though abbreviated in many sections.²¹⁸ The main difference is the possibility of reading into this account the possibility that Saul wanted to avoid a degrading captivity, which would mean that Saul “preferred not one mode of death to another, but death to life.”²¹⁹ There is a third account of this event found in 2 Sam. 1:6 but it is wrought with exegetical difficulties, and the further difficulty that it gives a quite different account in that Saul is killed by

²¹⁵ Daube, D., “Death as a release in the Bible”, *Novum Testamentum*, vol. 5, 1962, p. 83.

²¹⁶ 1 Sam. 31:3-5.

²¹⁷ Daube, D., “Death as a release in the Bible”, *Novum Testamentum*, vol. 5, 1962, p. 84.

²¹⁸ 1 Chr. 10:4.

²¹⁹ Daube, D., “Death as a release in the Bible”, *Novum Testamentum*, vol. 5, 1962, p. 85.

somebody else. In Conclusion Daube claims that the meaning gained from this account is “that for a king, death is a lesser evil than an inglorious and friendless life.”²²⁰ All in all the conclusions are quite similar Saul took his life and no judgement is passed.

Ahitophel was to strangle himself²²¹ as “death at once, with certain tangible advantages for his family, in preference to death only a little later with his family ruined.”²²² This could be seen as a premeditated act of despair²²³ or as a calculated judgement to preserve his family’s fortune. Because he saw that the massacre was to fail he avoided a criminals death and secured the families fortune. This is demonstrated by the remark “he was buried in the sepulchre of his father” and in the next chapter, by the fact that his son is named in a list of the mighty men of David.²²⁴ Again no judgement is made or adverse consequences experienced.

Zimri is another to opt for suicide as an escape from a terrorising situation. Having killed the royal master and usurped the throne he met opposition from an opposing king. Seeing that his hometown was being captured he set fire to the royal palace and burnt himself to death in the process.²²⁵ This was done in order to avoid an “ignominious traitor’s end”.²²⁶

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

²²¹ 2 Sam. 17:23.

²²² Daube, D., “Death as a release in the Bible”, *Novum Testamentum*, vol. 5, 1962, p. 87.

²²³ Brown, R., et al. eds., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, (Bath: Geoffrey Chapman), p. 158.

²²⁴ Daube, D., “Death as a release in the Bible”, *Novum Testamentum*, vol. 5, 1962, p. 87.

²²⁵ 1 Kings 16:18.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 87 also cf. 1 Kings 16: 18.

In another account of a suicide we see Eleazar sacrifice himself beneath a royal caparisoned elephant.²²⁷ Later in what could be termed an example of attempted suicide before actual suicide was achieved, Razis committed a famous tribal suicide rather than fall into the hands of Nicanor. Firstly, he threw himself on his sword but in the heat of battle missed. Later he climbed up a wall to throw himself off but survived this which lead to his final attempt.²²⁸ This is yet another example of an uncritical account of a suicide in the Bible. Here we see how his enemies plot to kill him but he was determined not to fall into the hands “of the wicked and suffer outrages unworthy of his noble character”²²⁹ Here death is preferred to captivity and all that might accompany it.

Daube does highlight one distinct difference between the case of Raiz and those already mentioned. While he was tearing out his bowels he called on “the Lord of life and spirit to restore them to him again.” Now we see belief in the resurrection of the dead “less irremediable than it used to be.”²³⁰ This was the belief at the times of the composition of this book while medieval writers would have argued that as a suicide the resurrection would not apply.

This leads us onto 4 Maccabees with its account of Hanna and her encouraging her sons to face torture and execution rather than eat the forbidden meat. While being put to death she took her life so that no man would violate her. This is praised in the Jewish tradition particularly in the Talmud.

²²⁷ 1 Macc. 6:42-46.

²²⁸ This summary was found in Blazquez, N., “The Church’s Traditional moral teaching on Suicide.” Burnes, P., (tr.), *Concilium* 179, p. 64-66.

²²⁹ 2 Macc. 14:42.

²³⁰ Daube, D., “Death as a release in the Bible”, *Novum Testamentum*, vol. 5, 1962, p. 89.

One could not exclude Samson as yet another example. We have seen this event mentioned and explained away by the Fathers but the reality cannot be ignored. He pulled down the pillars killing himself, and three thousand Philistine men and women in an act of vengeance.²³¹ The purity of motivation, which the Fathers spoke of is not so clear.

This leaves us with the one New Testament example that being Judas. This is recounted in two of the Gospels and mentioned also in the Acts, all with differing emphases. Daube takes a view on this event, which is contrary to a position held by the Fathers and as such seen as part of the Tradition. He takes Matthews account of Judas' death and sees it firstly, in the context of repentance. Before his death he had repented of his wrong and in a sense charged himself before the chief priests. His death cannot be seen as an act of escape, deliverance, despair or nihilism.²³² We see Matthew "shows no trace of disapproving the suicide as such on the contrary, in the circumstances it is the most forceful expression of repentance, the crime is acknowledged in the clearest possible manner."²³³ Daube sees a similar attitude of non-comment in regard to suicide in the story of the Jailer who was going to take his life at the escape of Peter and the prisoners but did not. Here again while Peter try to give evidence that they are still in the Jail they never condemn suicide as such. To this he draws parallels with comments in John 7. Here the Jews misunderstand Jesus, thinking he will take his life, yet no condemnation of such is given. From this brief overview of scripture we see that suicides are accounted as part of the experience and brokenness of life yet no judgements are made or inferred.

²³¹ Judges 16: 27-30.

²³² Daube, D., "Death as a release in the Bible", *Novum Testamentum*, vol. 5, 1962, p. 88.

²³³ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

There is no expressed prohibition against suicide found in Scripture for the Christian:

Believes in a Providence, which makes all things work together for his good, and believes that there are no circumstances in which he is authorized to lay violent hands upon himself. There is no situation in which he cannot live with honour, and with advantage to himself as long as God chooses to continue him in being. ... Hence in the scriptures there is no express prohibition of suicide and no need for one.²³⁴

It would be wrong to take from this that the scriptures are non-committal in relation to suicide. With their overall drive for the victory of good above evil and its constant aim dispelling darkness and engendering hope; “to Christians and non-Christian alike, such a message is antithetical to encouraging suicide.”²³⁵

We have seen that with the convening of the Second Vatican Council came a change in many sectors of the Church and in the Church’s teaching. The teaching on suicide was to be no different. Firstly, in the application of the distinction between suicide, as objectively wrong while at a subjective level more sensitive conclusions could be reached. This was echoed in Canon Law with it relaxing of the punishments ascribed to suicide. The Church documents were to further en-flesh these ideas, all of which were expressed in the liturgy. Our re-look at scripture has shown that that condemnation is not for us as a community, our duty is to take notice and stand in solidarity. Judgement is made on the act as distinct to the person.

²³⁴ Amundsen, W. D., “Suicide and Early Christian Values” found in, Brody, A., (ed.), *Suicide and Euthanasia*, (London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), 96.

²³⁵ Amundsen, W.D., “Suicide and Early Christian values” p. 88 found in Brody. A., (ed.), *Suicide and Euthanasia*, (London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989).

Conclusion:

In our examination of suicide and its treatment within the tradition of the Catholic Church we have seen that what was written was often written in response to a specific reality within the Church at a particular time. It shows theology to be reactive rather than proactive.

For the early Church this was no different. There was always an effort to distinguish herself from the perverse nature of the culture in which she found herself. Anything which compromised this, brought a strong condemnation from the community. Hence the writing of the early fathers served to uphold the martyrs and their status while arguing strongly against suicide. These efforts to achieve clarity brought with it a harsh judgement on those who were perceived to have taken their lives.

With time we see that the writings of the Fathers became the foundation stone on which the codified law of the Church was to be built. We saw in the manuals, which were the textbooks for the formation of the clergy and the Catechism the textbook for the formation of the laity that suicide was again ruled harshly on. Coupled with this the subjective nature of suicide was never addressed. It was not stressed as a factor for evaluating somebody's guilt or not. The code of canon law gave support to this teaching. The most tangible expression was experienced in the liturgy, which forbade the burying of somebody who had taken their lives. Suicide was seen as a rejection of all a Christian should deem sacred.

The pre Vatican Church's theology was one, which could be classed as corrective, correcting the errors of reformation theology. In doing so, clarity became its mark and in its efforts for clarity, harshness was the tool used to dispel any confusion.

This changed with the second Vatican council as now the church began to dialogue again with the world around her. While claiming to have the fullness of revelation she could always gain richer insights and fuller knowledge of the human person while in dialogue with the human sciences. Coupled with this we see scripture being introduced as a formatting influence in the moral life. Moral theology began to look at the wider picture and the issue of suicide was to be no exception. With this fuller knowledge of the human person suicide and the reasons why people took their lives became more complex. Moral theology adapted itself to this wider worldview by broadening its tools of analysis. Now suicide was looked at from the objective perspective, which continued to rule that suicide was objectively always wrong. At the subjective level what was popularly called suicide was not suicide as defined in Canon Law. This was to express itself most forcefully in the liturgy as now suicides were given the full privileges, which were afforded to all her members. Judgement was left to God while the Church prayed for mercy. In the words of Barth:

But what right have we to isolate that last moment of human existence from that which precedes, and judge a man by this moment alone? Indeed we have even to ask Schatter whether we are absolutely summoned and authorised to adjudge a last act which has this content to be rebellion against God; whether we can clearly know or even assume as probable that it has taken place in rebellion against God; and therefore whether every case of self destruction is really suicide in the sense of self-murder. ... Even the most confirmed theological moralist ought to see this, and therefore to remember that perhaps he does not finally know what takes place

between God and the suicide, nor therefore what is the decision which drives him to this dubious act. Is it really self murder? A readiness to recognise that he may not have been a self-murder at all is required of all who know what it is to be assailed and afflicted even if only in theory. ... Even the most sincere believer may be hurled on his death-bed into the most profound confusion and uncertainty, even though there be no suggestion of suicide. What would become of him if there were no forgiveness at this point? Yet if there is forgiveness for him, why not for the suicide?²³⁶

This does not serve to diminish the Tradition or the objective wrongness of suicide but does reinforce the lessons of the second Vatican Council which it learn from scripture that we cannot put limits on the grace of God.

²³⁶ Barth, K., *Church Dogmatics. The doctrine of creation, Vol. III, part four.* (Eddinburg: T.&T. Clark, 1961) p. 406.

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