

Murphy, Kenneth B.  
The spiritual...—  
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THE  
CATHOLIC  
HOUR

Series: "The Spiritual and  
Corporal Works of Mercy"

Part I: "Suicides Anonymous"  
REV. KENNETH B. MURPHY, PRES.

Part II: "Suicides Anonymous"  
REV. CAJETAN CAMPBELL, O.F.M.

JULY 19, 1959

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## Part I

*Speaker: Rev. Kenneth B. Murphy*

Last year in the United States over 16,000 people committed suicide — an average of nearly 44 each day. There is no way of knowing how many others tried and failed or were saved from the attempt by a change of heart or mind. But these figures suggest that suicide can touch closer to home than any of us might think possible. Suicide, few people realize, is more frequent than murder and more easily predicted. There has never been a wide campaign against it as there has been against other less preventable forms of death. There is no organized public interest in it. There is very little scientific research about it. It is among the first ten in the list of killers. The lowering of the suicide rate should be a major mental health challenge.

*For suicide is preventable!!!*

Three times within a short period a year ago I was called unexpectedly from the rectory by police officers to three different young men who were attempting

suicide. Twice I was called out of a deep sleep around 1 A.M. and once in the middle of my breakfast, and each time tho' others had tried to dissuade the person I succeeded where they failed in getting the potential suicides to change their decisions and be rescued. I felt it was the finger of God marking out for me a new project, moreover I noticed that no one seemed to know how to act on these occasions when someone was hanging from the ledge of the 8th floor window or dangling outside an iron bridge railing ready to drop 150 feet. It was like walking on eggs. I used intuition and psychology and prayer.

I found there is little up to date literature on the matter, but there are a fantastic number of suicide attempts, 93,000 in U.S. last year; over 16,000 succeeded. As you listen in to this program at least two persons will succeed in taking their lives.

I suggested to Cardinal Cushing, a suicide bureau, and he had me interview the best psychiatrists in the country to see what would be feasible. They are all enthusiastic about Rescue, Inc.

Rescue, Inc., is a non-profit, non-sectarian organization for potential suicides. It is not just a suicidal referral service altho' it does that. I am a

Catholic priest in Rescue, Inc., because it was my idea, but this is not a naive approach to problems which arise in the field of medicine. Spiritual assistance is no substitute for psychiatric treatment but also psychiatric treatment is no substitute for spiritual assistance. We are not just a center for the collection of statistical data systematized to help pinpoint ages, types, causes and places of suicide — altho' we fulfill this service. We are more than a public health clinic.

We have a 3-fold program of research, (a 24 hour phone and office service) counselling (psychiatric and spiritual if necessary) and mutual assistance. (Like A.A. by group therapy potential suicides help other potential suicides.)

We are fighting a triple sickness of body, mind and soul. 75% of our 805 authenticated cases helped by Rescue, Inc., not by ladders and ropes — but by persuasion, in about 4 months of existence are benefitted by psychiatric care.

The question is often asked me: — Would a person seriously contemplating suicide interrupt the act and call Rescue, Inc., and wouldn't the fact he made the call indicate that it wasn't genuine?

One person who attempted suicide but failed, described those last moments in these words: "It was like the quiet before

a hurricane; — that dead stillness when nothing moves — my mind and my emotions seemed in a vacuum. I had no feeling whatever."

Yet when someone is deeply depressed they have a wish

	}	to kill
		to die
		to be killed

but they also have a wish to live right down to the end.

Quick action can save a life. They arrange the attempt so that it provides for the intervention of a particular rescuer. It might be that a friend who happened by, as is the custom, and the friend would call HA 6-6600. Attempted suicide is *Janus-faced*: — One towards death and destruction and one towards life and preservation. Nearly everyone who does commit suicide has given some earlier warning.

True, many attempted suicides are not intended to end life but are a gesture to bring other people to terms. But frequently they result in panic and accidental suicide or suicide by degrees.

They gamble with death — it is the most powerful bribe available — their life!

Two weeks ago a woman had an argument with her husband and at 25 minutes past five turned on the gas. For 25 years

her husband had arrived home promptly at 5:30, but on this occasion had arrived late. The patient was dead on admission to Boston City Hospital.

Persons who talk about suicide may very well commit it.

My dear friends: — If one word could sum up the life of our Lord, I think that one word would be "merciful". "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy."

Christ's practice of mercy towards sinners beggars description. He delights in mercy. But there can be and there will be no mercy toward us unless we ourselves are merciful. In our desperate suicide cases we see stark evidence of lack of mercy. We need an insurrection of kindness.

You know those who suffer most could well be our most important parishioners. For when God allows us to suffer, it is not to harm us, but to gather us into His arms. We learn with St. Francis de Sales that the love of Jesus begins in the Passion.

"Sorrow", states the poet Dante, "Re-marries us to God."

Dust we are — but living dust — and we owe our life to the spirit within us. Neither bodily suffering nor disgrace can justify deliberate suicide. Yet we

must recognize that no human being is in top form all the time. And we know well, what a *speck* of understanding will do in a dark hour. TALK (24 hour phone service) is the device that helps more than we know and can realize, any emotional problem. To talk it out — otherwise they may choke or strangle from too much introspection and deliberation over whether it takes courage to kill self or more courage to live and panic into self-murder.

We, through Rescue, Inc., and our staff of 70, thank God, are enabled to give free psychiatric and spiritual aid, and have aided 805 cases in 4 months.

As we set about our rescue work we use the slogan, "Here Goes, In The Name Of God." Mercy is that smiling daughter of Heaven who makes no distinction among God's children. She is the first one who said, "All men are created equal". She does not turn her face away even from the foulest, blackest and most despicable person who seeks her favor . . . she has her ear always open to hear those words, "O God, be merciful to me a sinner."

There is one deep-seated need which all of us have in common; the need to be loved and to know that we are loved. Without this feeling that there is someone who cares about us, and cares a lot,



life at best will be tasteless and at worse, frightening – frightening even to the point of suicide.

What are the causes for despair today?

The two causes for modern despair are sensuality and sadness. This is because sensuality produces continuous disillusionment. Its pleasures must be repeated because of their unsatisfyingness – they make hungry where most they satisfy. They create the feeling that all life is deceit. The fruit of pessimism blooms on the tree of a dissolute life.

Also, sensuality begets despair because by its very nature it is directed to a sensual object and excessive dedication to the carnal kills the capacity for the spiritual.

There is no desire then except the biological one; the future begins to be disgusting. From a stage where there is no time for God they reach another where there is no taste for God.

The second cause of despair is sadness: ie. – Surrender to states of depression because of a consciousness of sin and unworthiness. Many falls produce melancholy; repeated defeats induce despair.

Only when God ceases to be infinitely merciful and only when you begin to be infinitely evil, will there be reason for

despair — and that will be never!

In all our work at Rescue, Inc., we invoke this thought, namely: — "It is the greatest of all mistakes to do nothing because you can only do little."

We at Rescue hope our "Little Way", like that of St. Theresa the Little Flower, will really be a *big* way as we pray: —  
"If it's God's will — be still."

One "Blessed Be God" in adversity is worth more than a thousand "Thanks Be To God" in prosperity.

*Success is failure turned inside out  
The silver tint of the clouds of doubt  
And you never can tell how close you  
are*

*It may be near when it seems afar  
So stick to the fight when you're hardest  
hit*

*It's when things seem worst that you  
mustn't quit*

And now may God be with you every moment of your life!!

\* END \*

## Part II

*Speaker: Rev. Cajetan Campbell, O.F.M.*

The tragedy of suicide is always a difficult thing to understand. It doesn't make much of an impression upon us until it affects someone we may know and love. And yet it is something that is occurring all too frequently especially in our large cities.

Newspapers give us vivid accounts of the efforts of police officers who endanger their lives to talk someone down from a high place to the security of a psychiatric ward where they can receive help in arresting an illness that seems to lead them to deny the very fundamental drive to self-preservation. But what is often not recorded is the great number of times that the deed is uncovered too late.

Just two weeks ago while I was on duty at St. Francis of Assisi Church here in New York a squad car arrived at the Monastery and asked for a priest for a sick call. A short distance away, a young man, twenty-four years of age, shot himself in a hotel room that he had checked into an hour before. It was a hot, humid

day and the traffic of New York's Garment District only seemed to make it more urgent to get to the boy before he died but it was too late. The life of the city went on with all its noise and confusion oblivious of the fact that a short time before a man in loneliness and isolation amid thousands felt driven to take his own life.

This is but one isolated incident of something that any priest in a busy parish will meet in the course of his work. His greatest regret is that he could not reach the individual in time. Fortunately, however, most disturbed individuals do not end this way because the parish priest following the example of Christ, the Eternal Priest, whom he represents, often helps the lonely and despairing soul to realize that he is not alone. The parish priest will use the age-old pastoral techniques of the Church to instill in the troubled soul the hope that was extended to every person in trouble by our Divine Lord when he said "Come to me all ye who are troubled and heavy-burdened and I will refresh you." His essential mission is to show the person that life has hope and meaning when it is guided by the principles of the Gospel.

The priest is aware that there are many and varied reasons why a person will

become depressed. When, however, a serious depression exists, the priest will attempt to direct the individual to adequate medical help for the danger of suicide is a very real possibility and the scope of treatment is beyond his field of competence. However, there are many ways in which the priest can enable the troubled soul to meet the problem of life in a way that will help that person to accept his suffering and to use it to grow in the knowledge and love of God and avoid the despair that so often leads to suicide. At one time or another a serious crisis develops in every life and it is at this time when things seem to be beyond human comprehension that the light of faith can give a human being courage to accept the will of God. The love and understanding that is so much a part of the virtue of charity has the power to penetrate the loneliness and confusion of a troubled soul and this, coupled with the virtue of faith, can help build an abiding hope amid the complexities of modern living.

The parish priest is ready and willing to assist an individual to sort out the confusion that has arisen in his soul and bring him back to the realities of a life that is based on the truths of the Gospel. Through the administration of the

Sacraments of Penance and Holy Eucharist he can bring the tremendous influence of Divine Grace to the assistance of the individual. His effort and understanding often leads the despairing person to a realization that God is very close to him in his suffering and will give him the strength to cope with life's problems as long as he is willing to change his life. The priest indeed will do all in his power to avert the tragedy of suicide but he is powerless to render any assistance unless he is made aware of the condition. Too often the suffering person will seek every other means of escape from his anxieties before approaching the assistance of the priest. Hence the priest requires the assistance of Catholic laymen in his mission to the despairing because it is they, the laymen, who are so often in a position to make the troubled person aware of the help that is available to him. This the layman can do by the practice of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy.

The spiritual and corporal works of mercy are practical applications of the virtue of charity but they are so often overlooked in our busy world. Much of our living has become sheltered in the routine of daily existence so that we are little aware of what is happening in the

lives of those about us. The guilty rationalization "am I my brother's keeper?" has often been used to solve the uneasy conscience of the person who knows in his heart and soul that he could have done so much more to help another if he were not so engrossed in himself. One of the distinguishing marks of the early Christians was the love they had one for another. We seem to have lost something of that today in our hurried attempt to build for ourselves a financial and personal security that can at most bring us an uneasy realization that we have done the best we could. The cult of success, so much a part of the business philosophy of the contemporary American has dulled our sense of charity as we become engrossed in a ruthless attempt to achieve prominence and importance despite the cost in the shattered lives of others. The individual who has broken under the stress of modern living will very often reach out for help but we are so desperately afraid to become involved in the problems of another that we often disregard them. Many of these individuals must turn to those outside their families because those close to them are often so involved in their life problems that they feel they cannot offer them very much help. Hence it is important for the

other members of the Mystical Body, the Catholic layman, to be ready to offer his friendship and help in time of need. Very often a simple little patient listening with an attempt at understanding will make a burden seem so much easier to carry. The effort required on our part is so little in comparison to the peace we can bring to the heart of another. We so often find in helping others we, in turn, help ourselves. It seems that unselfish love which is extended to another person for no motive of personal gain aids in our growth to spiritual maturity. In our cities where the problem of the lonely and despairing person is so acute there is much for the Catholic layman to do. We have heard the example of how one city has attempted to cope with its problem. It is a splendid effort and it will achieve success. However, organizations of this kind should only reinforce our own conviction that it is we as individuals who must practice the spiritual and corporal works of mercy among those with whom we come into contact if we are to do our part as members of the Mystical Body in alleviating the suffering of the despairing soul. This may seem like a tremendous task but really it isn't. Within your own circle of acquaintances and friends you probably know individuals who need your



comfort and understanding. Why not make an attempt to practice the spiritual and corporal works of mercy in a realistic way by offering your comfort and solace to those who seek your assistance. In the words of St. Francis of Assisi we might all become instruments of God's peace to the despairing soul. In this way, we can do our part in assisting the Church and the parish priest in aiding those who seem to have lost hope.



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