

Last week the United States Supreme Court upheld an Oregon law permitting physician-assisted suicide. For 12 years now in Oregon, under certain conditions, if you want to end your life, you can hire a doctor to help you. The Catholic Church opposed this law from the start, and Catholic hospitals in the State of Oregon refused to participate in suicides.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church says, “We are obliged to accept life gratefully and preserve it for [the honor of God] and the salvation of our souls. We are stewards, not owners, of the life God has entrusted to us. It is not ours to dispose of” (2280). Medical procedures may be discontinued when they are burdensome, dangerous, extraordinary, or disproportionate to the expected outcome. In those cases, you do not cause death, you accept your inability to stop it (cf. 2278).

When the Catholic hospitals of Oregon took a stand against physician-assisted suicide, they stepped up their efforts to improve end-of-life care. They offered more effective pain management, spiritual counseling, family support, and they involved patients more in decisions about their care. The results were positive.

Depression is a major cause of suicides. We hear in today’s first reading a portrait of depression, spoken by the sorrowful Job. He says, “I have been assigned months of misery, and troubled nights have been allotted to me. If in bed I say, ‘When shall I arise?’ then the night drags on; I am filled with restlessness until the dawn. My days come to an end without hope. My life is like the wind; I shall not see happiness again.”

Why do some people choose physician-assisted suicide? Researchers in Oregon have discovered these reasons: fear of pain, depending too much on other people, loss of dignity, and worries about burdening the family. So if you improve the care you give at the end of life, it decreases the demand for suicide.¹

In today’s responsorial psalm, we sing, “Praise the Lord, who heals the brokenhearted.” This psalm was first sung by people who witnessed the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and were scattered to other places, like the survivors of Hurricane Katrina last year. This optimistic psalm says the Lord rebuilds Jerusalem and gathers together the dispersed of Israel. “He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds. Great is the Lord and mighty in power; to his wisdom there is no limit. The Lord sustains the lowly.”

Everyone goes through some periods of depression. For some those periods are severe, and you cannot stop some people from taking their own lives. But as a Church we can offer hope to those who suffer, ease their pain, reassure them with our love, and proclaim the mercy of God, who trusts us with life, and who heals broken hearts.

¹ Elements of this homily are taken from Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, “Religion & Science: Bridging the Gap,” *Commonweal* 133/2 (January 27, 2006):6.