

There is not just death, but resurrection

By Father Joseph Breighner

In various publications I've noted news stories about the increase of suicides in Europe. Predominantly it is among men, and mostly about economic issues. Men are losing businesses. They are losing jobs. They are losing government support, as the "safety net" in Europe collapses.

No this is not another article about suicide. That was last week! Today I want to deal with an issue that is not getting a lot of attention - namely, what happens to people who "abandon" or "lose" their Faith. In other words, what is life like without God?

For decades, now, Church attendance in much of Europe has declined. Some figures show as few as 16 percent of the Irish attend weekly Mass! Similar statistics trend throughout Europe.

Commentators and writers for much of the secular media celebrate this decline. They see it as Europe throwing off the "shackles of Rome." Several years ago, when Pope Benedict visited Czechoslovakia one pundit commented that "Opinion polls indicate that the average person has more faith in info-mercials than in the Church."

In the U.S. People who leave one Church generally join another. I've been told by various Protestant pastors that former Catholics make up 20 to 30 percent of their congregation. They often add that former Catholics are among their best members - faithful to weekly Church attendance, and among the first to be involved in outreach programs. As one pastor humorously told me: "You Catholics have produced a lot of good Protestants!"

But what about those who go nowhere? In Europe statistics confirm that those who leave the Catholic Church mostly give up on faith altogether. If "being enlightened" means leaving the Church, what is the dark side? I fear that depression, despair, and

suicide are part of that dark side.

At the heart of Christianity is death and resurrection. The life of Jesus is forever an anecdote to despair. From a human point of view, the life of Jesus was a disaster. He was rejected by the leading religious leaders. He was ordered executed by the civil authorities. The crowds turned on him. His closest followers abandoned him. On a human level, it's hard to have a worse life than Jesus.

(As an aside, I've been known to pose the question to people at various talks: "If you knew the pope excommunicated me, and that the Governor had set a time for my execution, and everyone who knew me spoke ill of me, would you be here for my lecture?" That was the experience of Jesus.

Yet, here we are, 2000 year later still remembering him. You see, there wasn't just death. There was resurrection! Jesus modeled that "success in life" was not measured by money, power, prestige, possessions, the approval of anyone, or the adulation of the crowds. Jesus taught rather that love was the only power that mattered, and the only power we ever really have. And he modeled that if we trusted God's infinite love for us that our sins would be forgiven, and that we would not stay dead. He invited those who believe in such a God to bond together with others, to form a Church, a community of believers, who would love and serve each other, and love and serve the world. In doing this, we would become what we loved - we would become the Body of Christ. To quote the great St, Basil: "We have become what is otherwise inconceivable. We have become God!"

Copyright (c) May 25, 2012 CatholicReview.org