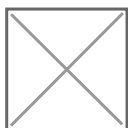


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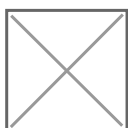
The "At Peace" prayer garden to remember those lost to suicide is seen at Queen Heaven Cemetery

The "At Peace" prayer garden to remember those lost to suicide is seen at Queen Heaven Cemetery of the Archdiocese of Chicago in Hillside, Ill., July 29, 2026. The garden includes two big sculptures designed to evoke tranquility. (OSV News/Simone Orendain)



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A Chicago-area Catholic cemetery this summer unveiled a garden where those who lost loved ones to suicide can remember them in prayer.

In the plaque at the opening of a long path toward two large sculptures that evoke peace, the Archdiocese of Chicago notes that it is the first U.S. Catholic archdiocese to create such a memorial in a Catholic cemetery.

A large bronze angel and a stainless steel spire-like piece bearing eight life-sized doves adorn the grounds near the main entrance of Queen of Heaven Cemetery in

the Chicago suburb of Hillside, 16 miles west of downtown.

The archdiocese's vicar general, Auxiliary Bishop Lawrence Sullivan, led the project with retired Fr. Charles Rubey, who has run a suicide bereavement program for Catholic Charities since 1979.

"This is a place for people to come and to just spend time with the Lord, to be with God in prayer, to feel his love, to feel God's peace," said Sullivan, who blessed the sculptures and led the dedication on June 26. "And again, these are the family members of those who died."

Sullivan, former head of the archdiocese's cemeteries, told OSV News he and Rubey started talking about the garden memorial called "At Peace" about six years ago when he said they had become keenly "aware of the need to address mental health issues."

"It was giving them permission to feel supported by others. And so that's when I would say that it really started to gain momentum ... like, we need to address this issue and let people know that the church is there for people when they're suffering," said the bishop.

At Catholic Charities of the Chicago Archdiocese, Rubey founded the counseling program called Loving Outreach to Survivors of Suicide, or LOSS. About 80 of the program's members attended the dedication at the garden, according to the archdiocese.

Suicide is not often talked about and in most cases is brought on by mental illness, according to Marian Fr. Chris Alar who is provincial superior of the Marians of the Immaculate Conception for the U.S., U.K. and Argentina. He wrote *After Suicide: There's Hope for Them and for You*, which delves into God's mercy for the souls who have taken their own lives and those they leave behind.

Alar, whose grandmother's suicide prompted him to write the book, said that for some time Catholics widely believed it would bring damnation to those who took their own lives because they would have no chance to repent. But he said church teaching "is quite different."

"We're not so sure that these people have free will, that they want to commit this act. (For) some, it's a desperation ... a person may not have given full consent of

their will," Alar told OSV News.

Paragraph 2282 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church states, "Grave psychological disturbances, anguish or grave fear of hardship, suffering, or torture can diminish the responsibility of the one committing suicide."

With this reasoning, Alar said, "over the years, the church has turned to a more subjective view and has become much more pastoral, because subjectively, there may be mitigating factors such as mental illness or a lack of free will."

"So we're counting on God's mercy. You know, nobody can really understand the unimaginable pain that is the reason that somebody would do this, would take their own life. So no one can really, therefore, judge a person whose choice we can't fathom," he added.

Alar said the prayer garden and sculptures "could be a wonderful thing because ... we should honor their lives. ... We pray, especially for those who were weighed down with great burdens. But we never want to portray the idea that it's OK, that a way out of your problems is to take your own life."

At the same time, he reiterated, "Most often it is an illness, not a consequence of who they were as a person, or how they live their life, that caused the suicide. Really, it's a final act of someone trying to end extreme pain. Either emotional, physical. But again, it's not the answer."

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Nestled in a circle of tall bushes, flowers and three metal benches, the 20-foot-tall spire gleaming in the sunlight, called Ascension is topped by a ninth larger than life-sized dove, "meant to invoke the Holy Spirit," according to Gino Tassara, who runs Inspired Artisans with his father, Gianfranco Tassara.

The archdiocese commissioned Milwaukee-based Inspired Artisans for the project. Tassara told OSV News that Sullivan first approached his longtime friends at Inspired Artisans several years ago with a "very concrete idea" of what they were looking for, and multiple artisans got to work.

The 6-foot-tall angel dubbed Embrace includes a granite bench at the foot, where one can sit enveloped and shaded by its wings as it gazes down at the visitor.

Tassara said the "At Peace" project is a first suicide memorial for Inspired Artisans, which has produced multiple works, including altars, church mosaics and religious sculptures, for the last 30 years.

"A lot of our projects are, I would say, incredibly meaningful to not only us, but obviously the people, the communities they serve, where they end up being in. And this (Chicago project) is like the cream of the crop in that regard," said Tassara.

"It's just such an honor to bring comfort, hopefully bring comfort to someone in need," he said.