

[News](#)



A sculpture of ascending doves is displayed at a memorial for survivors and lives lost to suicide dedicated by the Archdiocese of Chicago at Queen of Heaven Catholic Cemetery in Hillside, Ill., on Wednesday, Sept. 9, 2026. (AP Photo/Luis Andres Henao)

Luis Andres Henao

[View Author Profile](#)

Associated Press

[View Author Profile](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

Chicago — October 9, 2026

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

EDITOR'S NOTE - This story includes discussion of suicide. If you or someone you know needs help, the national suicide and crisis lifeline in the U.S. is available by calling or texting 988. There is also an online chat at 988lifeline.org

The Rev. Charles Rubey recalls the moment when he realized Catholic priests needed to do a better job supporting families of those who died by suicide.

Two women told Rubey they had asked their parish priest to pray for family members who had killed themselves. At that time, the Catholic Church banned funeral rites and burial on consecrated grounds for those who died by suicide. Rubey says the women told him: "the first thing out of the priest's mouth was: 'Well, you know, your loved one is in hell.'"

But Rubey disagreed with the damning judgment. Seeking to ease the pain, he reassured them: "They're with God!"

It was a turning point for Rubey. He began blessing bridges, railroad tracks and basements where people had taken their lives, and in 1979 founded the LOSS Program ("Loving Outreach to Survivors of Suicide"), a counseling and support service run by Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Chicago. At 86, this ministry remains an important part of his life.

The Chicago archdiocese recognized Rubey's work this year by dedicating in his honor a memorial to the lives lost to suicide and their surviving families. The archdiocese says the "At Peace" memorial at Queen of Heaven Catholic Cemetery is the first of its kind by any U.S. archdiocese.

To Rubey, it's a sign of the church's shift toward a more compassionate understanding of suicide.

"They've made a complete turnaround embracing families who have lost a loved one to suicide," Rubey said. "They're no longer condemned or thought to be in hell."

Catholic teaching still considers suicide a grave sin. But it acknowledges that mental health problems can lead people to suicide and says salvation is possible for those who take their own lives.

Chicago-born Pope Leo XIV has dedicated some of his monthly prayer intentions to people suffering from mental health problems and suicidal thoughts.

He called on the church to become "a safe space where everyone has a place — a community that accompanies and never excludes, that listens without judging and draws near without fear."

The memorial's location was carefully planned

Rubey and Bishop Lawrence Sullivan, vicar general of the Chicago archdiocese, designed "At Peace" during the COVID-19 pandemic, when mental health issues came to the forefront, intending the memorial to provide succor for people of all faiths.

"We used to tell people, 'Buck up, just white-knuckle through it,' " Sullivan said. "And now we understand, 'No, there's serious mental health issues out there.' It's not a question of willpower. It's not a question of right or wrong."

The memorial, which features sculptures of an angel and bronze doves, is located in a cemetery that is also home to the world's largest Catholic mausoleum.

"We did not want this memorial hidden away and we were intentional in every detail," Sullivan said when the memorial was announced. "This is not something we are ashamed of."

Among those who attended the memorial's dedication in June was Rabbi Marianne Novak, who joined LOSS after her 18-year-old daughter, Batsheva Chaya, died by suicide in 2017.

"It was important to have a place for people so that they could remember their loved ones in a loving way, not to focus on how they died," Novak said.

Catholic burial for people who died by suicide

Until a 1917 church law was revised in 1983, those who died by suicide were denied Catholic burials on consecrated grounds.

"The church never showed an acceptance of suicide. ... They thought that their adamant position would dissuade people from doing it," said James Keenan, a Boston College theology professor.

He said a shift in attitude began with the reforms of Vatican II, the 1960s meetings that modernized the Catholic Church. It continued with the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which was approved in 1992.

That document says suicide is contrary to God's love. But it also says "grave psychological disturbances, anguish, or grave fear of hardship, suffering, or torture can diminish the responsibility of the one committing suicide," and "we should not despair of the eternal salvation of persons who have taken their own lives."

A turning point after a painful experience

In recent decades, a greater understanding of mental illness has helped shift the cultural view on suicide and influenced Catholic teaching.

The Rev. James Martin, editor-at-large of the Jesuit magazine *America*, says the Catholic Church's approach mirrors that of the broader society with more sympathy for all affected by suicide.

"To be able to extend pastoral care to the family members is extremely important, and to not make them feel any sense of shame or isolation, or judgment on them from the church," he said.

That was the painful experience of a Michigan family.

The priest officiating the funeral of 18-year-old Maison Hullibarger in 2018 questioned whether the athlete and honors student would get to heaven after he died by suicide. His father, Jeff Hullibarger, told the *Detroit Free Press* he asked the Rev. Don LaCuesta to stop but the priest continued his critical sermon, calling suicide a "sin against God with dire eternal consequences."

The Archdiocese of Detroit apologized, saying an "unbearable situation was made even more difficult."

Maison's mother Linda Hullibarger sued LaCuesta and the Detroit archdiocese, alleging intentional infliction of emotional distress and more, but the courts sided with the priest on First Amendment grounds.

"That was really a turning point in many ways because the Catholic Church got such bad press," said Mathew Schmalz, a religious studies professor at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts.

"It also shows that the priesthood in the United States, and I'd say throughout the world, needs better training in dealing with complex phenomena like suicide," he said.

A call to expand mental health ministry

Ed Shoener, whose daughter Katie died by suicide in 2016, co-founded the Association of Catholic Mental Health Ministers to "educate parish communities to break down the stigma around mental illness and to accompany people in the midst of these struggles."

The global association advocates for the Catholic Church to do more to improve mental healthcare.

In January, Shoener met with Pope Leo to thank him for his interest in mental health and told the pontiff that he hoped the church could issue an in-depth statement about mental health in the form of an apostolic letter or an encyclical.

This month, he returned to the Vatican for an event coinciding with Leo's monthly prayer intention and World Mental Health Day on Saturday. Religious leaders and health professionals will gather to examine how parishes respond to mental health issues and how to best answer Leo's call to establish mental health ministries to overcome stigma and discrimination.

That's also Shoener's hope. "I'd love to see this become just a fully integrated ministry into the church — that it's a common ministry in every parish around the world, just like youth ministry."

He and Ranana Dine, director of the Catholic-Jewish Studies Program at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, hope the Chicago memorial will be replicated elsewhere.

"Creating physical spaces, landscapes, things that people can touch, sit in, be in, that tell them they're not alone, that they don't need to be ashamed, that give a physical space for grief, is really important," Dine said.

Advertisement