

Doerflinger: A tale of two narratives on assisted suicide

Here's a narrative recently promoted nationally, beginning in Seattle, by the Associated Press.

In May, a 75-year-old man with cancer named [Robert Fuller](#) obtained a lethal drug overdose under Washington state's *Death with Dignity Act*, and planned his suicide down to the last detail – with help from suicide enthusiasts at End of Life Washington counselling organization.

He arranged his funeral at St. Therese's, the Catholic parish he had been attending; hosted a farewell party at his Seattle apartment building; married his male partner of some years; and later that day, administered the drugs before witnesses and died.

He had invited an AP reporter and photographer to follow him through this process because "he wanted to demonstrate for people around the country how such laws work."

Something like this (usually without the festivity and orchestrated media presence) has happened in my home state of Washington about 1,200 times since it legalized physician-assisted suicide in 2008.

Then AP adds this: The Sunday before his May 10 suicide, Fuller attended Mass for the last time, and allegedly received a blessing for what he was about to do (photographed by AP) from local Jesuit priest Rev. Quentin Dupont, accompanied by white-gowned children receiving their First Communion.

In support of this narrative, some have pointed to a Facebook post in which Fuller had said "my pastor/sponsor has given me his blessings. And he is a Jesuit!!!"

The fact is, Fuller posted that in March, so could not have been referring to Father Dupont's blessing on May 5. The pastor of the parish, Rev. Maurice Mamba, is not a Jesuit. We may never know who that Jesuit really was, if he exists.

Dupont, it turns out, [barely knew](#) Fuller and had no idea he planned to kill himself. Coming down the church aisle at the end of Mass, he was confronted by a man who asked for a blessing because he was dying.

Dupont led the children in praying for his strength and courage during this difficult time. He saw someone take a photo, but didn't know it was by a news photographer and never signed a release for its public use.

This seems like a set-up, designed by Fuller (or the activists assisting him) to embarrass the Church and undermine its witness against the assisted suicide movement.

When the pastor learned of Fuller's plans, he visited him and tried to dissuade him – and when that effort failed, he consulted the archdiocese on whether to go through with his funeral.

The [decision](#) was to proceed, to provide pastoral care for those mourning his death, on the condition that there could be no perceived support for the way Fuller ended his life.

What lessons can we learn from this?

First, some parishioners (notably his longtime friends in the choir) knew of Fuller's plans and accepted them, even attending that final party. This is a grave wrong and a scandal. But some Catholics have trouble believing that these priests were initially unaware of Fuller's intentions. As a parishioner in the Seattle archdiocese, I disagree.

The priest shortage here is severe. My own pastor has care of four parishes and a mission, and for part of this year didn't have a parochial vicar. He does an amazing job in difficult circumstances, helped by retired and visiting priests and lay administrators.

Dupont, a full-time graduate student at the University of Washington, was visiting St. Therese's solely to say Mass, as he has done before (there and at another parish, despite his academic workload). The pastor, Father Maurice, has sole care of two parishes; that morning he was saying Mass at his other church, where he resides.

If you are upset that our priests barely have time to provide the sacraments, let alone get to know the inner lives of their parishioners, I agree. Please join me in praying for more priests.

Second, could anyone have blocked Fuller's plans? It seems doubtful. He was "half in love with easeful death" for most of his life. AP reports that when he was eight years old in New Hampshire, his beloved grandmother drowned herself in the Merrimack River. From this he says he learned: "If life gets painful, you go to the Merrimack River."

He attempted suicide in 1975, after he told his wife he was gay and his marriage broke up. Later he helped care for friends with AIDS, administered a fatal dose to one of them, and led a risky sexual lifestyle that "verged on suicidal" – apparently wanting to get AIDS because "all my friends were dying." He had belonged to the Hemlock Society, and a year *before* his cancer diagnosis showed great interest in Washington's law when a woman in his building was using it to kill herself.

Why didn't this longstanding suicidal fixation show up during his psychological evaluation under the Washington law? Because 96 percent of the patients obtaining the lethal drugs never receive one. Like such laws' other "[safeguards](#)" against abuse, this one is a joke.

Third, the Associated Press violated all guidelines endorsed by the [World Health Organization](#) and [suicide prevention organizations](#) to keep news reports on suicide from leading other depressed and vulnerable people to take their lives.

The AP story provided details on the method used, treated suicide as a solution to problems, and romanticized the entire affair ("the party of a lifetime," said the headline). If more people kill themselves because of this thinly veiled advertisement, their blood is on AP's hands.

Fourth, what of the Church's stand? The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* makes [three things clear](#): Suicide is gravely evil; personal responsibility for it can be greatly diminished by factors such as anguish, fear of suffering, or psychological disturbance; and the Church does not despair of the salvation of those who take their lives but prays for them, knowing that God may lead people to repentance at any time in ways known to Him alone.

The actions of clergy in this case, therefore, seem consistent with this particular application of St. Augustine's maxim to hate the sin but love the sinner (or better, to hate the sin because we love the sinner).

That maxim, mocked by secularists, is difficult to live by – especially on matters of sexuality or life itself. Some Catholics are tempted to err by hating sin and sinner together, others by thinking they have to love and accept both. Yet it seems to me, that maintaining those distinctions – and keeping that balance – is central to our Catholic faith.

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