



Knowing my Value Believing that my life is a gift.

The Church teaches that the human person is "the only creature on earth that God has willed for its own sake". (CCC 356) This means that God created you as a gift, specially designed to be given first of all to yourself. A genuine gift doesn't have to be materially expensive, but it has to have value. It can't be a piece of junk; it has to be *good*.

God is a good and loving Father and He only gives good gifts. God chose to create you to share in His very Life. Your worth is not in the grades you get, the sports games you win, how you look, or how many friends you have. Your worth is in your identity as a child of God. When a person loses the knowledge that God created him or

her out of infinite love, for a very specific reason, it is easy to begin doubting one's self-worth and purpose. Amidst the many pressures of life today, many people become vulnerable to tragedies such as eating disorders, self-harm (cutting), alcohol and drug abuse, and even suicide.

The typical person tempted to suicide is not someone with an inescapable desire for self-destruction, but a vulnerable person suffering from acute stress or treatable mental health problems. In some cases, people are suffering from severe anxiety as they struggle to achieve impossible goals. Reason and judgment are most often clouded by depression, anxiety, drugs or alcohol.

Suicide is *never* the right answer. It's a permanent solution to a temporary problem or situation.

The difficulties that lead a person to lose sight of the value of his or her own life have their roots in challenges that are common to our human condition. Having a better understanding of the nature of the human person helps us to better recognize and cherish the gift of each of our lives.

God created us in His image and likeness (Gn 1:27), the image of a Communion of Three Persons. We were made for communion, and so we have a deep desire for authentic relationship, to be given to one another in love. Only in heaven will we find perfect belonging so it is only natural that, from time to time, all of us feel left out or lonely. The emotions associated with this -sadness, irritation, frustration, puzzlement- are all common and normal to experience. Loneliness is less about the number of friends you have, or likes on social media, than it is about how you feel. Even the most popular and outgoing of people can feel intensely alone. And, while some people are happy to spend their time solo, others may feel very isolated, even when they are part of a larger social circle.

On top of this, being a teenager today is a draining full-time job of homework, managing a social media profile, and worrying about everything from racism to climate change. Every look and every word is documented on social media and open to comments by everyone else at every moment. It can be completely overwhelming at times!



According to the CDC, 10.5% of young people aged 12-17 have diagnosed anxiety, while 6.1% of young people have diagnosed depression. Certain life circumstances may make a person feel more isolated. For example, being the new kid at school, a family

crisis, struggling with sexuality issues, obesity, or a chronic illness. At times, everyone struggles with negative thoughts and feelings. But when negative feelings takeover and persist, they can lead to depression, expressions of self-harm and, occasionally, thoughts of suicide.

Human beings are made up of both body and soul. We have external senses— touch, taste, sound, smell, sight – that tell us about the world around us. We also have “interior” senses – our feelings and emotions- that help us recognize what is happening inside of us. Emotions are neither right nor wrong; they are morally neutral. Even unpleasant emotions (anxiety, sadness, anger, frustration) are good. They protect us from harm and encourage us to take care of ourselves and others.

Our emotions strongly influence our thoughts- how we interpret situations and events- and the choices we make. But the human person has a spiritual nature too: the capacity to reason and to make choices. God gave us these gifts of our humanity so that we can be truly free. When the pressures of our emotions threaten to overwhelm us and fuel unhealthy thinking patterns, our reason and free will can help reorient us to the truth of who we are in the Lord.

What do you do when you find yourself in a situation where you feel stressed, overwhelmed, lonely, or rejected? We cannot necessarily change how we feel, but we *can* change how we think! Here are some helpful steps to engage your reason and will:



1. **Pray** – begin by reorienting yourself to your true Center. Reach out to the Lord in your own words, or say an Our Father, remembering that you are a child of God. Ask Him to help you in this moment of need.
2. **Identify Your Thoughts.** What exactly is going through your mind in this situation? Spell out your thoughts, especially the negative ones. (Sometimes we aren't even fully conscious of what we are thinking in a given moment).
3. **Use Your Reason.** Are your thoughts actually true? Is there any evidence to support them? Are they exaggerated? What deeper meaning can you find in these circumstances?
4. **Choose the truth.** Put together more realistic and meaningful considerations, and use your will to choose to concentrate on these thoughts instead of the original negative thought pattern.
5. **Gratitude.** Say a prayer of thanksgiving to God for helping you to try to break out of your habit of bad thinking and reward yourself for your efforts!

Times of stress or isolation sometimes make us doubt God's love for us and the goodness of our lives. It helps to be reminded that our dignity and worth comes from the God who created us, to be reminded that our life is a gift and nothing we can do or that can be done to us can change that reality.

"We are not some casual and meaningless product of evolution. Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed. Each of us is loved. Each of us is necessary." – Pope Benedict XVI

There is a lot we can do to help ourselves deal with the hard things in life. Learning good thinking habits is one of them. But we were never meant to walk alone. God gave us to one another as gifts, to support one another along the journey of life. The best thing for someone who is feeling isolated, anxious or down is to find help and accompaniment.

Fr. Robert Spitzer, SJ, former President of Gonzaga University, gave a retreat to college students. He explained that God is very much alive in our world today, even when we cannot see him. He said that when we feel overwhelmed or anxious, rather than turning to drugs, alcohol, sex or other activities that will give us a temporary high, we need to go to the source of all peace, all happiness, all hope. He taught the students a simple, powerful prayer. When times are tough, he said, feel free to shout at God. Let him know you are mad! Nobody understands the frustrations and suffering of the world more than God. Throw up your hands and tell him, "I need help! You take over!"

We can also ask for help from the people around us – our teachers, parents, counselors – and trust that God will work through them. In the individualistic culture of the United States, it can often seem shameful or a sign of weakness to ask for help. However, nothing could be further from the truth. If you are struggling, the most courageous decision you can make is to ask for help. Jesus taught, "Knock and the door shall be opened for you". Trust that God and the people around you care and would do anything to help you.



Suicide can be a challenging topic for everyone, but please remember these resources for anyone suffering from depression or having thoughts of suicide:

For immediate, free, and confidential help (for you, or for a friend):

**988 SUICIDE & CRISIS
LIFELINE**

24/7 CALL, TEXT, CHAT

While 911 is geared toward a law enforcement response, 988 connects a caller in a mental health crisis to a trained counselor who can address their immediate needs (and even help connect them to ongoing care if they desire).

Discussion Questions:

- How do I typically respond when I experience difficulties or stress? Who are my go-to's that I can turn to for help? (*Can you name 3?*)
 - **Problem Solver Activity:**
Imagine a friend comes to you with one of the following scenarios. Try to imagine what negative thinking patterns he or she might be tempted to fall into. How could you help him or her use reason to see things more clearly? What would you tell your friend?
 - **Identify Negative Thoughts** (*what might they be tempted to think about themselves in this situation*)
 - **Use your reason** (*which of these thoughts aren't true or may be exaggerated*)
 - **Choose the truth** (*what positive and true thoughts will you tell your friend to focus on instead?*)
1. Everyone is laughing at me because my so-called-friend posted a photo of me talking to a senior who I just asked directions from with the caption "Desperately looking for a date"! I'm so embarrassed and humiliated; I just want to disappear!

2. There's a big school festival day coming up and we're allowed to come in our regular clothes, not our uniforms. My best friend has the best stuff and I look like a loser next to her. Should I just stay home and be sick? This is just one more way that I'm different.

3. Everyone at school looks at me as the guy who has it all. I have to keep up this stupid façade of being cool when I just want to hit something or somebody. My parents fight all the time, my dad drinks and gets really angry and then takes it out on me. Playing basketball helps me to sweat it out, but I'm getting a lot of fouls on the court. Am I going to be just like them?

4. I keep seeing TikToks from parties and fun at school but I'm never invited to any of them. Why is this happening to me? These are supposed to be the best years of my life. Now everyone is talking about what they're doing over the midterm break and no one asks me to join in or what I am doing. I'm so tired of being alone!

5. There's a kid in the grade below me that gets bullied all the time. Kids have posted stupid photo-shopped pictures of him, and they call him all kinds of horrible names. I really don't want to get involved, but I heard the kid say that he was going to jump off a bridge so no one would have him to push around anymore. Do you think he's serious? What should I do?

