

Suicide and the Communion of Saints. By Rhonda Mawhood Lee. William B. Eerdmans, 2025. x + 128 pages. \$19.99 paperback.

Writing not only as a theologian and priest of the Episcopal Church but also as a “survivor of parental suicide,” Rhonda Mawhood Lee, in *Suicide and the Communion of Saints*, offers an urgent and deeply pastoral response to the problem of suicide. Divided into two parts and eight chapters, this book includes a review of the common ways we talk about suicide, a brief discussion of suicide in the Bible, and an engagement with two influential Christian theologians, Augustine and Aquinas, whose writings have profoundly shaped the dominant Christian imagination on the subject. Lee takes seriously the psychological, physiological, historical, and social factors and structures that so frequently influence suicidal behavior. For example, one of her most insightful case studies is the slave trade. “Death touched every element of the slave trade,” she observes (51). Many enslaved people considered suicide the only path to freedom and an alternative to unspeakable dehumanization.

Most importantly, she attempts to respond to the many theological and ethical questions suicide raises, including whether those who take their own lives bear moral responsibility for the act and what this means for their salvation (4). With many years of experience as a Christian minister, Lee is unsurprisingly committed to a pastoral approach. She is especially attentive to the “complicated emotions” experienced by survivors, a reality she knows intimately, having lost her mother and later her biological father (whom she never met) to suicide (2). Central to her project is the Christian responsibility to articulate a more hopeful theological vision—one that “more fully expresses our trust in God’s grace” (73).

Convinced that Christians, having been touched and transformed by the power of the resurrection, cannot remain silent in the face of suicide, she insists that they must learn to speak about it with profound humility (48), not only because human emotions about suicide are “intense and conflicting” but also because of the church’s “problematic history in reckoning with suicide” (3). For much of history, she observes, “The dominant strain of Christian thought has been that suicide is a mortal sin, by which the person condemns themselves to hell” (6). Voiced by church leaders, ministers, and theologians and reinforced by pastoral practices including mutilating corpses and denying Christian burial, the aim was to deter suicide (42).

Although Lee considers the above approach “cruel and theologically dubious,” she does not deny its practical effectiveness, even strongly suggesting that her grandmother’s dread of eternal punishment may well have kept her from moving on to attempting suicide (14). Lee, however, argues that it often led to “unforeseen

consequences" (48). One striking example comes from Germany in the year 1704. Agnes Catherina Schickin, a thirty-year-old servant, deliberately killed a seven-year-old boy. She confessed to the deed even before anyone was aware that the child was missing, arguing that the "innocent" boy is surely in heaven. She expressed hope that her execution, which was to follow, would be after she had an "opportunity to confess and be absolved, sparing herself eternal damnation" (47).

Ultimately, Lee is critical of any ethical or pastoral approach that ignores God's deep compassion toward human frailty (15). Those who struggle with suicidal thoughts remain "God's beloved," bearing "a searingly acute form of the pain of inhabiting a creation that groans while awaiting its full liberation from the power of death" (70). The Christian community must always witness to the power of the resurrection and to the communion of saints, to which all Christians, not excluding those who have died by suicide, belong.

In conclusion, while Lee's significant contribution to this often-neglected topic would have benefited from a more sustained engagement with Scripture and church history, her effort to reach a broad audience is arguably better served by the brevity of her theological discourse and scriptural exegesis. Particularly compelling is her vulnerability as a "survivor of parental suicide" (65). The book's final paragraph, at once personal and prophetic, could only have been written by one who continues to trust in God's love and the power of the resurrection after losing both parents to suicide: "I can't guarantee that no one I love, or you love, will ever again die by suicide. But I can do what I can to witness to God's love and to the reality that this love connects us all. And I can encourage my fellow Christians to do the same" (97).

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Conflict and Catholic Social Ethics: An Interdisciplinary Approach.
By Taylor J. Ott. Routledge, 2025. 212 pages. \$170 hardcover.

Modern Catholic social teaching (CST) has addressed several conflicts over the decades: workers' rights, the nuclear standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, and struggles for independence in the Global South, among others. Nevertheless, as Taylor J. Ott argues in *Conflict and Catholic Social Ethics: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, CST, and Catholic social ethics more broadly, has treated conflict as an aberration and social harmony as the default state of society. Instead, Ott proposes that conflict—which ranges from disagreement to social protest to armed