

GRACE AT WORK IN THE WORLD?: THE PROBLEM OF DEPRESSION
AND DEPRESSIVE SUICIDE—SELECTED SESSION

Topic:	Grace at Work in the World? The Problems of Depression and Depressive Suicide
Convener:	Jessica Coblentz, Saint Mary's College of California
Moderator:	Jennifer Lamson-Scribner, Boston College
Presenters:	Jessica Coblentz, Saint Mary's College of California Elizabeth L. Antus, Boston College
Respondent:	Paul Crowley, S.J., Santa Clara University

Coblentz's "Persistent Depression, Diminished Freedom, and an Account of Non-liberative Grace" identified three challenges that chronic and recurring depression presents to the doctrine of grace and in turn introduced a contextual theology of grace amid persistent depression. According to Coblentz, depression poses a challenge to the doctrine of grace, first, because it is frequently misrepresented, which inhibits an accurate perception of God's loving presence in this context. Second, depression, like all suffering, threatens the affirmation of divine benevolence upon which the doctrine of grace is predicated. It thus challenges theologians to embrace the delicate task of witnessing to grace's effects without eliding depression's harrowing realities. Third, the frequency with which grace has been defined in relation to sin and evil and the semantic overlap between historical accounts of sin and contemporary accounts of depression can together mislead theologians to moralize depression as a problem that grace resolves. This simplistic interpretation erases the moral ambiguity of depression that surfaces throughout first-person narratives of depression. To meet these challenges and clarify the effects of grace amid depression, Coblentz proposed an account of grace's effects from the narratives of depressive experience. Namely, she identified the effects of grace with the life-giving expansions of possibility that one experiences amid persistent depression. She pointed to two examples—small recoveries of agency and new perceptions of flourishing amid depression—to illustrate concretely this work of grace.

Elizabeth Antus' "'The Silence of the Dead': Depressive Suicide and the Eclipse of Grace and Freedom" presented a nuanced portrait of suicidality based on current interdisciplinary scholarship and proposed a theological response to suicide deaths wherein "grace at work in the world" seems to have failed. Antus explained that suicidality, which is most often related to depression and other mental illnesses, commonly results from extended habituation to violence or pain, perceived burdensomeness, and a low sense of belonging. Those experiencing suicidality frequently attest to an unbearable and otherwise-inescapable pain, or "psychache." According to Antus, this profile of suicidality challenges wrongful assumptions about the emotional and moral strength of the suicidal person as well as the non-lethal possibilities apprehensible within the person's world of pain. Drawing on the work of J.B. Metz, Antus argued that Christians have a responsibility to remember those who have died by suicide. This memorialization must entail not only a clear-eyed recollection of the pain and suffering of suicidality but also a remembrance of people's joys, interests, and hobbies, so as to resist the dehumanizing reduction of the suicide-dead to the means by which they died. This remembrance of the dead affirms their full subjectivity as members of the human family and as beloved persons before God. It

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can also habituate us to compassion and hope in imitation of Christ that spurs our participation in the operations of grace in our world.

Paul Crowley's response highlighted key theological features of the respective papers and pressed the authors to explore further the implications of depression and depressive suicide for our treatments of theodicy and our theologies of grace and freedom. Crowley questioned the extent to which a depressed person is authentically free to open oneself to grace, especially when depression is totally debilitating. This matter is still more complex in view of depressive suicide, when one's actions are not free in any straightforward way. He also asked how others might participate in the communication and reception of that grace in a depressed person's life, offering the writings of William Lynch and Jeffrey Smith as potential resources. Of suicide, Crowley raised the issue of contributing social forces, citing homophobia and the ubiquity of guns as factors in the high rates of suicide among LGBTQ youth. He also invited further reflection on the work of grace in the lives of those who have lost loved ones to suicide. To conclude, Crowley drew on Rahner to address the problems of evil and suffering raised by both papers.

Jennifer Lamson-Scribner gracefully moderated the panel and the conversation that followed.

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