



## Contradictory Suicide Messaging

***"The moral outrage and public reaction to Michelle's behavior reveals a striking irony at the heart of Conrad's suicide, namely, that similar indignation about encouraging someone to commit suicide is almost entirely absent when it comes to "physician-assisted" suicide."***



In July 2014, police found the body of 18-year-old Conrad Roy inside his truck in Fairhaven, Massachusetts, having died from carbon monoxide poisoning.

As the case unfolded, it became apparent that a friend of his, 17-year-old Michelle Carter, had encouraged him toward suicide. In a series of texts, she repeatedly pressured him to go through with it by sending messages like, "You keep pushing it off and say you'll do it but u never do. It's always gonna be that way if u don't take action."

As he sat in a remote spot in the Kmart parking lot, the truck's cab filling up with fumes, he got cold feet and stepped out of his makeshift death chamber, seemingly conflicted about what he was doing. He then spoke with Michelle by phone, who coaxed him to continue the suicide. The call was not recorded, but months after his death, she texted another friend and recounted how Conrad had grown scared at the last moment, climbing out of the truck, and that she had told him to get back in. She then listened over the phone as he succumbed to the fumes 47 minutes later.

Following a high profile trial that received extensive media coverage, Michelle was convicted of involuntary manslaughter and sen-

tenced to 2½ years behind bars, of which she has to serve a minimum of 15 months. Prosecutors claimed that her motive may have been to gain attention and sympathy as the "grieving girlfriend."

The case drew intense national and international attention, partly because it involved a relationship that had played out mostly through texts and Facebook messages. Even though Michelle and Conrad lived less than an hour apart, they rarely met in person.

As Michelle was led away from the trial in handcuffs, the court of public opinion was virtually unanimous in condemning her actions as reprehensible. Her actions and the trial proceedings, however, also opened up broader questions about provocation toward suicide in a society like ours that increasingly devalues human life. In fact, the public reaction to Michelle's behavior reveals a striking irony at the heart of Conrad's suicide.

The irony involves the moral outrage that surfaced regarding Michelle's text messages. Similar indignation about encouraging someone to commit suicide is, paradoxically, almost entirely absent when it comes to "physician-assisted" suicide. Michelle's text

# Making Sense of Bioethics

## Contradictory Suicide Messaging

messages embraced the same key ideas that lawmakers in nine states have now enacted through legislation, namely, that it's sometimes allowable to encourage and participate in suicide. Most legislation, however, only permits those in the medical field, those dressed in white lab coats, as it were, to be involved.

This requirement seems quite arbitrary, of course, if the real goal is to alleviate suffering by eliminating the sufferer. After all, Michelle was convinced she was acting compassionately by assisting Conrad to escape from what she claimed was his misery, depression and intense emotional and psychological suffering. Who is to say that Michelle was wrong if the white lab coats are right? If it were deplorable for Michelle Carter to facilitate Conrad Roy's suicide, how can it be good for physicians and other health care workers to facilitate the suicides of their ailing patients who are at least as fragile and vulnerable as Conrad was?

This remarkable moral schizophrenia may soon be enshrined in a new piece of legislation that claims to outlaw participation in a person's suicide. Massachusetts state lawmakers and Conrad's family gathered in July 2019 at the Statehouse to intro-

duce Conrad's Law, a bill making it a crime to encourage or assist a person in taking his or her life. On the face of it, the law obviously seems like a sensible piece of legislation, but even as lawmakers were trying to stop people from assisting at suicides like Conrad Roy's, they were simultaneously seeking to protect medical personnel who might assist at the suicides of their patients. The double standard was impossible to miss, with Conrad's Law including an explicit subsection exempting those involved in physician-assisted suicide from prosecution. Even though physician-assisted suicide is not yet legal in the Massachusetts Commonwealth, another bill promoting it is under active consideration by the legislature.

Society really can't have it both ways, glamorizing the act of suicide in some cases and demonizing it in others. By yielding to the proposition that suicide is not an evil to be repudiated, but a form of "relief" to be conferred on those who suffer, we effectively abandon our neighbors, the Conrads and countless others, in their moment of greatest need.

*Rev. Tadeusz Pacholczyk, Ph.D. earned his doctorate in neuroscience from Yale and did post-doctoral work at Harvard. He is a priest of the diocese of Fall River, MA, and serves as the Director of Education at The National Catholic Bioethics Center in Philadelphia. Father Tad writes a monthly column on timely life issues. From stem cell research to organ donation, abortion to euthanasia, he offers a clear and compelling analysis of modern bioethical questions, addressing issues we may confront at one time or another in our daily living. His column, entitled "Making Sense of Bioethics" is nationally syndicated in the U.S. to numerous diocesan newspapers, and has been reprinted by newspapers in England, Canada, Poland and Australia.*

