



LIGHT & LIFE

VOICE OF THE ROSARY CENTER & CONFRATERNITY

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Fr. Dismas Sayre, O.P., *Director* Mar-Apr 2024, Vol 77, No 2 Western Dominican Province

My son Absalom, Absalom my son

Our home city of Portland often appears in the news; sadly, for all the wrong reasons. There is still a lot of good in this city and its people, but for various reasons beyond the scope of our newsletter, we have become a Ground Zero for the drug epidemic, especially that scourge of the streets, fentanyl. So many have come here to escape and to have a relatively peaceful place in which to take their drug or drugs of choice. Whatever the possible good intent of our lawmakers and citizens, the problem has only worsened.



One day last Summer, I was driving to do physical therapy for my back, dressed in casual gym clothing, when I received a call from the parish, which was unusual, since usually there's at least one of the parish priests available, but they were all out on sick calls or saying Mass. There was a young man across the street from us dying from a drug overdose – would I be able to see what I could do for him? So I turned around, and came back home to find a team of paramedics attempting to bring him back, but without any seeming chance of success. From my vantage point, I was able to give a conditional absolution and Apostolic Pardon. There was no way to know if this young man was even Catholic, but in such cases, we do our part as priests and if they are capable of receiving such sacramental graces, then fine, and if not, then they are still commended to the gracious mercy of God. Regardless of who he was, *he was still someone's son.*

“My son Absalom, Absalom my son,” is the cry of King David on hearing the news of his son's death,

continuing, “Would to God I had died instead of you, Absalom, my son, my son!” (2 Samuel 18:33)

To call the history between King David and his son Absalom “complicated,” would be an understatement. There was tension and fighting back and forth, eventually leading Absalom to rebel against his very own father, causing an open revolt in Israel against King David. In the eyes of King David's own soldiers and kin, Absalom deserved to die; he deserved to be put to death. The messenger that delivered the news of Absalom's death to King David thought he was bringing news of a great joy and victory. Instead, the sorrow of King David brought shame and sadness upon the king's army. Whatever else happened, Absalom was *always* King David's son.

Whatever the cause, whatever the source of the addiction, many parents have asked us to pray for their children, especially those who are in the vicious grip of drug addictions. Many times, these children are hard to recognize from their younger, happier days. Parents will often agonize over what they did or could have done differently, but there is often no easy answer, especially in a society that is flooded with such poisons. There may be absolutely no blame – things absolutely can happen that are beyond any parents' control.

And that young man that died, seemingly abandoned on a city pavement as he died, he was someone's son. But above all, he was a child of God. Trial and circumstance could mar and soil his outward appearance, but under the grime from living on the streets, he was made in the image and likeness of God, *always* a child of God.

This summer, we will celebrate a special novena to St. Mark Ji Tianxiang. Born in what is now Hebei in the People's Republic of China, he was a doctor who contracted some kind of stomach ailment which caused him pain. He used opium to treat his own affliction, not knowing of the incredibly addictive nature of this drug. For thirty years, he was not able to receive the Sacraments, since his own priest, likewise not knowing the mechanics and science of addiction, felt that St. Mark did not show enough resolution to avoid sin. Still, St. Mark persisted, being a faithful Mass goer, constant in prayer, raising his
(Continued on page 4)

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Novena of Masses in honor of
Easter

Mar 31st - Apr 8th

TO BE OFFERED FOR YOUR INTENTIONS

THEOLOGY FOR THE LAITY

Easter is a Time Of Liberation

By Fr. Dismas Sayre, O.P.

I would dare say that all of us in this material and consumeristic world, are to some extent, slaves, bound to a kind of vice or perhaps a relatively harmless addiction, that nevertheless will often pull us away from what is truly good, beautiful, and true. The pillars of the family have been worn down, and support is more and more difficult for many of our brothers and sisters, who then lean on the use of chemical or psychological addictions to attempt to shore up their mental health.

I remember seeing a post on social media online somewhere about a drug addict describing his journey to sobriety, beginning with the realization that, "I had to accept that I will never feel that good again." This sounds horrible and jarring, and it is. But it is mostly because that man was sold a bill of goods about what drugs and addictions can do; that they can make us *feel* good, but in the end, the feeling is baseless, and is not rooted in reality, only perception. The "high" is replaced, not just by the low, but by emptiness, once it passes. The sexual addict seeks love and affirmation, but again, he or she is relying on the physiological responses of the mind and body, not on a true kind of love as the foundation. The marital act is meant as a unifying and creative force for the wedded couple, but instead has become a source of a brain chemical rush, and then, loneliness and emptiness again. We become slaves of that false fullness, if not of the belly, then of the mind. This is *not* what we are created for. The Catechism of the Catholic (no. 1730) teaches us that:

*God created man a rational being, conferring on him the dignity of a person who can initiate and control his own actions. "God willed that man should be 'left in the hand of his own counsel,' so that he might of his own accord seek his Creator and freely attain his full and blessed perfection by cleaving to him."*¹

*Man is rational and therefore like God; he is created with free will and is master over his acts.*²

The United States bishops approved and distributed their own thoughts to this problem, stating that:

Chemical dependency is a direct assault on the dignity of the human person, a destructive invasion of the lives of individual users, their families, and their communities. Each of us, created in God's own image, is intended to share our Creator's freedom, love, and happiness. People physically, mentally, or emotionally addicted to a drug, in contrast, are clearly dependent, enslaved, and unhappy—a perversion of God's creative plan for us. (New Slavery, New Freedom: A Pastoral Message on Substance Abuse, United States Catholic Conference, 1990).

This freedom, this control over our own actions, is meant so that we *can* be free to choose the good. God may move us in many different ways -- He may cajole, He

may inspire; He may even punish, but He will not violate our free will. Substituting this "freedom for excellence" that allows us to choose the good, for a "freedom for licentiousness," is a trap, and not a terribly original one at that.

St. Paul's writings can be summarized as a kind of calling his audience back from slavery to true freedom through the grace of Christ Jesus. He knows, however, that some had used this freedom as an excuse to give themselves back to sin.

"I have the right to do anything," you say—but not everything is beneficial. "I have the right to do anything"—but I will not be mastered by anything. You say, "Food for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will destroy them both." The body, however, is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? (1 Corinthians 6:12-15, NIV)

And it is not just sexual licentiousness that is often legal in our world, but gambling and even non-therapeutic drug use as well. Yet, as St. Paul reminds us, and we often have to remind *ourselves*, that just because something is legal does not make it a desirable good. Even knowing that something *is* good or bad for us in itself is sometimes not enough to persuade us to choose or avoid the action. St. Paul, again, famously complains to the Romans that, "For I do not do the good I *want* to do, but the evil I *do not want to do* – this I keep on doing" (Romans 7:19). He does not excuse himself, however, adding, "Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me" (ibid, vv. 20-21). People who come to Confession will often echo this same complaint, even if they do not know or realize that even the saints have the same struggle. They do not know or forget the next part from St. Paul, where he adds that, "For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?" (ibid, vv. 22-23). So yes, by nature and grace, we all *want* to do the good. The addict does not want to destroy his or her life and that of others, but has no seeming choice – he or she must, in his own mind, choose that destructive addiction. So what is St. Paul's solution? Christ, of course! "Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, *I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in my sinful nature a slave to the law of sin*" (ibid, v. 25).

Wait, so how can St. Paul speak of freedom so poetically and then use the language of "slavery" to God's law? Is

this not contradictory? No, because we choose to bind ourselves fully and freely to God. This is part of the root of the word “religion,” to tie back, or to bind something, in this case, to bind ourselves to God -- who, in more than all fairness, binds *Himself* to us! We choose this holy bond, in much the same way we choose the bond of Holy Matrimony, where we bind ourselves and our fortunes to another freely.

Some see this as constraining, but it is the idea of binding ourselves to a greater good, a greater goal than we ourselves on our own are capable of. A physically gifted child may never excel, if she does not put herself under the tutelage of a great coach. A mentally gifted student might falter in gaining knowledge, if he does not sit down and commit himself to doing the work necessary to learn. A mother and father each becomes a greater person by surrendering some of his or her own personal wants for the sake of the family. We humans are social creatures, and by nature we *will* form bonds with one another – the child will first bind himself to his parents, then when he grows older, bind himself to his friends, then to his spouse, and so forth. One who does not have *any* kind of social or religious bonds may well then find himself bound from one lowly form of servitude to another vice or addiction. What we really, *actually*, lose when we bind ourselves to God and to others in love is not our freedom, but our illusion that we are self-sufficient in all things, that we “shall be as gods,” as the Evil Deceiver tells our first parents.

Realizing this truth and living it out is the first step to sobriety, be it physiological or spiritual. As Our Lord at one point tells His audience, who considered themselves already free, but were not yet, in fact, truly free from sin, “*You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free*” (John 8:32). The group Alcoholics Anonymous puts this as their first step in their Twelve-Step Program: “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol — that our lives had become unmanageable.” As Christians, we bind ourselves not just to “a” truth, but to *the* Truth, the source of all Truth. We hitch our spiritual wagons and fortunes to the one who Ascends to the Heavens and sits at the right hand of the Father.

This idea of binding ourselves to the good, to *the* Good, does go against the flow of our culture, and even against our own animal instincts sometimes. As the great writer Flannery O’Connor is reputed to have said, echoing the previous Scripture verse, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you odd.” But it is in a tavern of drunks that the tee-totalling Designated Driver stands out as the odd duck, and “not like the rest of us.” In this hypothetical tavern, the Designated Driver, in freedom, puts aside perhaps some pleasant and reasonable consumption for the greater good of his friends’ lives, binding himself to them and their good.

So let us take a look at the drugs in themselves, and in this case, we can lump in drinking alcohol, or ethanol, as a drug.

No drug in itself is an evil. *Morally* speaking, and isolated from a person, any drug is ethically inert, and

is simply some kind of chemical compound, whether naturally-occurring or man-made. It is when these are wrongly or imprudently applied to real human beings where we run into moral problems. We can differentiate here, as loose categories, between medicines and drugs. Where is the line drawn?

Well, medicine is meant to lead to our flourishing as human beings, in at least as much as we are able to with the help of this medicine, provided that I use the medicine reasonably and responsibly. For example, I regularly take medication against neuropathic pain. This allows me to live life more fully, more actively, and even, in a way, pray more, since I am not so distracted by what would be the constant discomfort. Insulin is meant to restore the body to where it is meant to be functioning. In neither case is the medicine or its side effects the goal in itself. That would be leading us away from human flourishing, and binding ourselves to that empty “feeling” or coping mechanism. Alcohol has historically been seen as something that allows greater social bonding and joy by lowering inhibition, but societies have always looked down on seeking the artificial elation of alcohol in itself, since then, one is living for alcohol, and not for oneself. Scripture tells us, “*Let not wine-drinking be the proof of your strength, for wine has been the ruin of many,*” (Sirach 31:25, NAB), yet also continues, “*Wine is very life to man if taken in moderation. Does he really live who lacks the wine which was created for his joy?*” (ibid, v. 27).

Abuse of alcohol leads to a diminishing of the human capacity for reason and judgment, which is an attack on our human dignity as being made in the image and likeness of God. Just affecting brain chemistry is not in itself an evil, provided, again, that it helps restore one to medical wholeness as much as it is possible. A woman suffering from a severe mental illness may well take medication precisely because of its actually *positive* effects on brain chemistry. Even fentanyl was originally manufactured for its own proper medical use case, albeit with a great potential for abuse, which is why it is so controlled.

Addiction in *itself* is an evil, though not always a moral evil on the part of the person, evil in this case being the privation or absence of a good that *should* be there, that is, sobriety. We can think of newborns who are born already addicted to opiates or alcohol, for example. They made no choice to abuse a substance – it was the world they were born into, literally. It *is* an evil because it robs the children of their freedom as human beings and potential to flourish. Willingly and knowingly abusing a substance *is, however*, a moral evil, acting against the virtue of temperance, which “*disposes us to avoid every kind of excess: the abuse of food, alcohol, tobacco, or medicine*” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2290).

To those who say that abusing or producing destructive drugs is harmless or morally neutral, the Church teaches:

The use of drugs inflicts very grave damage on human health and life. Their use, except on strictly therapeutic grounds, is a grave offense. Clandestine production of and trafficking in drugs are scandalous practices. They constitute direct co-operation in evil, since they encourage

people to practices gravely contrary to the moral law. (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2290).

Those who manufacture or distribute such drugs, especially with the objective of binding their customers or users to a life of drugs are especially culpable of a great evil. There is the common trope thrown around that a drug dealer will always tell you that, "The first hit (dose) is free," because he or she knows that then they will have you hooked, if not right away, then soon enough, and so will have a customer for life. Human traffickers are known sometimes to get the women or children they are selling addicted to some substance, so that their capacity for escape is lessened, and their mental acuity is dulled.

But what about the case of our saint, St. Mark Ji? He clearly and repeatedly abused opium. In his time, however, it was presumed that this opium would have an actual therapeutic use, which is why he prescribed it for himself, and was not chasing the high of the drug nor the addiction. His would be an acting out of understandable ignorance. In our own times, many who had been prescribed opiates for pain were not seeking addiction or highs, but therapeutic relief. But we saw how opium effaced St. Mark's freedom, his capacity to choose, in that he always seemed to need it. Still, thankfully, it did not *totally* destroy his freedom, and he was able to choose a relatively good Christian life and give witness, *in spite* of his addiction, being what we might call "a functioning addict." Most drug addicts are not so fortunate.

So it would be at least *an* evil, in so far as it robbed him of his freedom, though morally speaking, his capacity to freely choose to sin would be severely affected, and so it would seem difficult, if not impossible, to describe his use of opium as a mortal sin. Were he to first choose to abuse drugs as a way to seek a high, in spite of knowing the dangers, that in itself would be a grave evil, though this might be mitigated by circumstances. These degree of these moral acts are often difficult to judge from the outside, but the object of the action, the abuse of drugs, is always in itself evil. Of course, the more and more one becomes addicted, the less and less freedom one could have to freely choose the drug.

Let us then, continue to pray for all our brothers and sisters under this pernicious chemical and psychological slavery. I repeat, it is always very difficult, from the outside, to determine the degree of freedom or knowledge any one individual may have at any one moment, and so properly judge the severity of the moral act, but we cannot decry other sins that attack human dignity, such as pornography, issues of life, and so forth, and then somehow overlook this scourge of addiction. What has previously been consigned to the shadows and dark corners of our cities is now boldly present in many urban centers, rural communities, schools, and homes. Before we attempt to pluck the mote from the eye of the other, let us examine ourselves and remove whatever addictions or obsessions draw us away from loving God and neighbor. And then, let us pray without ceasing for those who need our help.

**Our Lady of the Rosary, St. Mark Ji Tianjiang,
Pray for us!**

Footnotes:

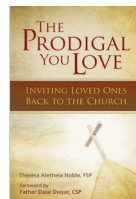
1. Gaudium et Spes, 17, Second Vatican Council; Sir 15:14.
 2. St. Irenaeus, Adv. haeres. 4, 4, 3: PG 7/1, 983.
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(Continued from page 1)

family in the faith, and even giving free medical care to the poor, in spite of his heavy addiction. Finally, after thirty years of faithful witness, he was able to receive the Sacraments once again.

Later, during the Boxer Rebellion in China in 1900, St. Mark and scores of fellow Christians were rounded up and ordered to renounce their faith. St. Mark not only did not renounce his faith, he asked to be executed last, so he could help and strengthen his brethren, so that no one else would die alone. What makes this even more stunning is that St. Mark would have had to suffer opioid withdrawal in prison the entire time *he* was ministering to his fellow inmates, singing a Litany to Our Lady. One could easily understand and forgive him if he had asked to be executed first, but he, the "weak" drug addict, was perhaps the brightest light among many lights in the darkness of his prison walls.

To honor St. Mark Ji, and for all those whose sons, daughters, and loved ones are in the grip of some sort of addiction, we will be offering a Novena of Masses from July 1-9 here at the Rosary Center. We do not want to solicit any donations, or seem as if we are profiting in some way from this dreadful epidemic. Simply join your prayers and intentions to ours at that time. We will also be sending out holy cards with a prayer to St. Mark Ji with our Easter mailings. There are many sons, many daughters out there on our sidewalks, and in need of prayer. And who among us is not at least in need of prayer?



The Prodigal You Love

When your loved one falls away from the Church, treat them gently and with great love.

"The tragedy of God's longing, and of ours, is that even God, despite his omnipotence, chooses not to guarantee our loved one's return to the practice of the faith. God does not force anyone to be in relationship with him; if he did, it would not be a relationship of love." -From the Introduction

When someone you love leaves the Catholic Church, they need a great deal of prayer and love. However, approaching that person with the charity that they deserve and need can be confusing. Sr. Theresa Noble, a former fallen-away Catholic, gently voices ways to talk with and love those who have fallen away.

Above all, she reminds you that God loves your Prodigal even more than you do. With her gentle encouragement, she will lead you to continue to hope for their conversion, so that you might share the joy of the Father when *The Prodigal You Love* returns home. 208 pages. \$5.00.

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