

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

With your kind permission, I am going to set our Gospel text aside for a moment and direct your attention to a verse from our second reading from Ephesians. The Sacred Writer admonishes, “And do not get drunk on wine, in which lies debauchery.”

Pardon me for meddling for a few moments. Of course, that is part of my job description: To comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. In this country we have a serious affliction with which we have become much too comfortable. So, let’s talk about alcohol and drug abuse and chemical dependency.

It has been reported that today one out of every ten children in the United States has an alcoholic parent. When chemical dependency is added to the mix, it is closer to one out of every five children have a parent who is impaired. That’s scary! There are more than 25 million Americans addicted to drugs or alcohol, and in most cases both. What’s even more troubling, it is estimated that there are more than 500,000 children between the ages of 9 and 12 who are dependent on alcohol. By the time they are high school seniors, more than 80% have used alcohol or taken drugs, and 62% of them have become drunk or impaired by drugs. Let’s not kid ourselves, this isn’t other people’s kids. It’s our kids. It’s not a secret that we have a heroin addiction problem in Octorara High School, and certainly in Coatesville, and probably Pequea Valley as well. And let’s not forget Bishop Shanahan. Do you think the devil’s not going to come after our kids in Catholic school as well?

No matter how you look at it, we as a people have a substance abuse problem. It is amazing to me that people panic when one person in this country dies of Ebola, when 65 people die DAILY in alcohol-related accidents. The vast majority of spousal and child abuse and neglect have taken place when the perpetrator has been under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs. Drug and alcohol abuse and chemical dependencies are the primary cause of the failure of marriages in this country today. St. Paul tells us the truth today-- getting drunk or high leads to debauchery.

It drives me nuts that all the politicians are for building walls to keep drugs and people from coming into our country, but none are addressing the real issue—the drug and alcohol dependency of more than 25 million Americans. If there was not such a fabulous market for drugs in the United States, people wouldn’t be trying to get them to us. And, I’m not talking just about illegal drugs. Prescribed drugs are being abused in this country at a rate that rivals the abuse of illegal drugs and alcohol combined.

Now, please don’t get me wrong! I am not against anyone enjoying a couple of beers, a glass of wine, or an occasional cocktail. Nor am I saying that you shouldn’t take prescribed medications judiciously. I am talking about drug, alcohol, and chemical dependencies that effect judgment, impair relationships, and lead to making bad decisions.

The questions we need to ask are: What are the controlling influences in my life? What are the controlling influences in our home? Who are my children's friends and what are the controlling influences in their lives and in their homes? If alcohol, drugs, or chemical dependency are among those controlling influences, you have a problem.

While genetics can have a role in addiction, the primary cause of alcohol and drug abuse and chemical dependency is the emptiness that people have in their lives. When your life is dominated by fear and a general lack of meaning, it is easy to turn to alcohol and drugs as a means of escape. What is the answer to such emptiness and meaninglessness in our lives?

The Sacred Writer today suggests AN answer in the next verse: "Be filled with the Spirit". As an alternative to allowing alcohol, drugs, or chemical dependency being the controlling influence in your life, he is urging us to allow the Holy Spirit be the dominant influence in our lives.

We don't speak of the Holy Spirit as much as we should. When we speak of being filled with the Holy Spirit, we simply mean a life in which Jesus is the dominant force because Jesus and the Spirit are one with each other and God the Father. The Holy Spirit is in fact the fulfillment of the promise Jesus made to us when He promised that "He would be with us always, even until the end of the world." The Holy Spirit is our Advocate, constantly pleading our cause before the Father, while, at the same time, being the very indwelling of Jesus Christ within each of us. The Holy Spirit is AWESOME!

What is life like when we allow the Holy Spirit to be the controlling influence in our lives? The first characteristic of a life dominated by the Holy Spirit is joy.

Now, here I'm going to a place that makes me uncomfortable, but I'm going to step out in faith and testify. Now I'm certainly not claiming to be anything other than what I am—a weak and sinful man, redeemed by the blood of Jesus on the Cross of Calvary. But I am going to offer myself as exhibit A. Joy dominates my life. In fact, I'm going to challenge you to think of someone in your life who is happier than me. As you know, I've had my ups and I've had my downs. But my prayer on those bad days when I've been tempted to feel sorry for myself is and has always been: "Don't let the devil steal your joy. Don't let the devil steal your joy. That's all he wants to do. He don't really care about you. Don't let the devil steal your joy."

Now I'll have a couple of beers socially; I'll have a smooth bourbon or two on occasion; and I can really enjoy a glass of wine at dinner, but I won't let those devils steal my joy. I have a tub of Percocet the Doctor prescribed for pain in my leg and a vial of Oxecodone the surgeon prescribed for the pain in my shoulder, and I've taken them on the rare occasions when the pain is really unbearable. But as soon as the pain subsides, I won't take them because I'll be damned if I'll let those devils steal my joy. For the most part, I get by with a little Excedrin once or twice a day, thank you very much.

That, of course, leads to the second characteristic of a life dominated by the Holy Spirit. Gratitude! I wake up in the morning I say, “Thank you, Lord!” I get out of bed and the pain shoots up my leg, I say, “Thank you, Lord, now I know I’m still alive. Thank you Lord! When you count your blessings, it has to make you feel good. Conversely, the unhappiest people in the world are those who lack gratitude—who believe that life somehow has cheated them. It is those lacking in gratitude who seek unhealthy ways to find satisfaction in their lives, which all too often leads to death and destruction.

All of this leads us back to our Gospel text where Jesus tells us, “Amen, Amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His Blood, you do not have life within you.” He is telling those who followed Him after the miracle of the loaves and fish and telling us, it is the Eucharist (taken from the Greek which means “giving thanks”) through which His life flows into us and gives us Spirit-filled lives which are full of joy.

I’m telling you, Church, Jesus is the answer for the world today. Our world! A world saturated in drugs, alcohol, and chemical dependency. When the haze of the drugs wear off, the stupor of the alcohol clears up, you’re left in the same empty place, living the same meaningless life, that’s killing you and those around you.

If you want to live a joy-filled life, full of gratitude, open your heart to the Holy Spirit who dwells within you, and come to Jesus, eat His Flesh and drink His Blood, that you might have His life within you. Then you’ll be able to say, as I am so joyfully and gratefully am able to say--Jesus is the best thing that ever happened to me. Thank you, Jesus! Thank you, Jesus!