



A PASTORAL LETTER ON THE DRUG ABUSE CRISIS FROM DEATH AND DESPAIR TO LIFE AND HOPE

“Not only that, but we even boast of our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance, proven character, and proven character, hope, and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” Romans 5:3-5

THE CRISIS THAT IS UPON US

Rarely does a day go by that we do not hear about a death that is the result of a drug overdose. The word “crisis” is used to describe the situation as it currently presses down upon us. Our priests have told me of their sadness and frustration at having buried way too many persons as a result of it. Many of you have told me how you fear that an addicted loved one might never find the way out of it. Some of you have come up to me and told me how you lost a son or daughter to it. Families are torn apart, lives are lost, and the future can be changed forever when a friend, relative, loved one, fellow parishioner, or even a complete stranger becomes entangled in the web of addiction and, sadly, sometimes dies as a result of it. The question we all have is this: “What can we do about it?”

We can either sink down into despair or rise up in hope. Our Christian faith compels us to choose hope. As St. Paul says, “Hope does not disappoint.” Ultimately, hope gives us the strength to choose life over death and to work for that day when the crisis is behind us. The Church, that is, the people who believe in the power and love of Jesus Christ — you and I — are called by God to give both hope and life. We must not be afraid to offer the healing power of prayer and the support of our community of faith as we confront this challenging evil of our time and place.

People who are addicted — whether to drugs or alcohol — often experience isolation and shame and the feeling that they have lost their human dignity. Even today, many of us hesitate to acknowledge that addiction is not a decision, but an overwhelming disease. We hear some people say, “They (addicted people) should just try harder, change their lifestyle, make different choices and then they will be just fine.” It is this stigma of addiction, this misunderstanding of the chemical and emotional dependency that an addiction creates,

that can keep the person who is struggling with addiction from admitting that there is a problem, let alone seeking assistance that is needed. Often the addict knows that the person he or she has become is not the person they once were or want to be now. They do not know how to find their way back to health and wholeness. They can feel powerless to begin the journey back to who God made them to be.

As an addiction grows, the hold it has on every aspect of a person's humanity is unbelievable. People come to a point where there is nothing that they will not do to maintain a chemical high. In some instances, this leads to actions that the addict would never even have considered if they were clearheaded. It is no secret that the rise in crime and poverty in many areas of the Diocese of Greensburg is directly related to the increase in people who are struggling to finance an increasingly demanding habit of addiction.

Unfortunately, the person with the addiction is not the only one affected by a debilitating and desperate situation. If someone you know — a spouse, friend, coworker, neighbor, or relative — is addicted, everyone in the circle of relationships is affected. No doubt, many of you have reached out to them and tried to assist them on their path to recovery. Sometimes this requires tough love, which is hard to give and often comes at a heavy cost to those trying to give it. Yet, I also know that there have been some uplifting success stories. Still, in many instances, the cycle of addiction returns and entraps your loved one with an increased force. This can be disheartening.

One especially deadly expression of the crisis of addiction, which is becoming more and more prevalent in our communities, is the current opioid epidemic. This particularly lethal addiction has had a devastating impact on the lives of the people in our churches and communities. In the four counties of the Diocese of Greensburg — Armstrong, Indiana, Westmoreland, and Fayette — there were 319 deaths directly related to opioid addiction in 2016. This statistic is staggering. The drug crisis and its effects are now no longer confined to the large cities of our land. This is a plague that has come into the homes and families of every city, town, and even the rural areas of our Diocese. It has touched the very hearts and souls of our parishioners in the pews and the people living in our communities; it has affected men and women of every age, profession, and state of life. Even more tragic is the reality that every one of those 319 deaths was preventable and did not need to happen.

The words of St. Paul, which I quoted at the beginning of this letter, give us a plan to move away from this scourge. He reminds us that whatever we chose to do in response to this crisis, it must be grounded in hope. Hope is the certain belief that God will provide what we need to overcome the struggles we are now facing. If we are not guided by hope, we will give up before the battle is won. We must have hope!

Now, you might ask, how can we offer hope to those who are in the grasp of hopelessness? We accompany them with courageous faith. We offer them the comforting presence and power of Jesus Christ, risen from the dead. Jesus will provide.

I write this pastoral letter to call the priests, deacons, consecrated men and women religious, and all people of faith within the Diocese of Greensburg to take action against the scourge of opioid addiction. With Jesus, who promises to remain with us, we can reach out in His name to help those who are hurting. We can let them know that they are not alone. We can remind them that they are loved. We can offer to walk with them side by side on the path to recovery. We can help them overcome the isolation and shame they may feel.

As a Diocese, we will begin our efforts with two things that we do well: Pray and Teach!

With the power of prayer, we can lift up our needs and the needs of those who are addicted to a loving God who is concerned for all of us. We know that prayer, this heartfelt and intimate communication with God, can make a dramatic difference in the life of someone coping with an addiction crisis. Studies have shown that a personal relationship with God has greatly reduced the return to using drugs after the user has gotten clean. So join me now in telling those in distress that we are praying for them. Then go the extra step and invite them to come and join us in prayer for their needs and for the ongoing support for their souls. And do not be afraid to pray with them right on the spot, if you feel called to do so. We know that our prayers are heard and answered by God, who wants only what is good for us.

Another thing that we do well as a Church is to teach. We often gather people together for a variety of reasons, including worship, service, religious education, and social functions. We already have many opportunities which we can use to educate people on the current drug crisis. Hopefully, education will be the preventive medicine that is needed so that many people, who might otherwise fall into the trap of using addictive drugs, will learn why and how to avoid them in the first place. I ask you to help me to get the word out about the reality of opioid addiction and how each of us can help in the fight against it. Use every way possible.

The fourth verse of our Diocesan hymn, *Risen Lord, We Gather Round You* says it much better than I ever could.

GO WHERE LIVES ARE BRUISED AND BROKEN; GO WHERE CHILDREN WASTE AND
BLIGHT. GO AMONG THE LOST, FORGOTTEN; GO WHERE SORROW SHROUDS MY
LIGHT. TAKE THE BREAD OF LIFE I GIVE YOU; SHARE IT WITH A WORLD IN
PAIN. GO, MY PEOPLE, BE MY SERVANTS TILL ON EARTH MY LOVE SHALL REIGN!

We need to show every person who is addicted to opioids that there is help and there is hope. We need to get the message out to every corner of our Diocese that those with an opioid addiction need not fear coming forward and seeking help; they need to know that we will not judge them, that we will not condemn them and that, above all, we care for them. We need to let every parent, child, sibling, friend or coworker struggling with the effects of dealing with an addicted person know that they are not alone. We need them to

hear loud and clear that the family of the Church is here to walk with them and support them.

To those who have lost a loved one to death because of an opioid addiction, or any kind of addiction for that matter, I have a special message: I cannot take your pain away. I cannot undo the past. I cannot relieve your sadness and grief. Scripture tells us that even Jesus wept when he realized that his friend Lazarus had died. What I can do is offer you a path to restore your hope. That path lies in the message of Jesus Christ. I know that Jesus is able to wipe away the tears from your eyes. If you have not already done so, I invite you to go to God and seek solace. I also want you to know that your loved one died of a serious and deadly disease called addiction. Drugs take away freedom, so the death of your loved one was not a free choice. Knowing that the Lord is especially close to those who are sick and infirm, I can say with certainty that the Lord was close to your loved one throughout his or her time of distress. May the Lord continue to hold your beloved one in the palm of his hand.

The promise of the Resurrection allows all of you who have lost someone to have real hope that you will see him or her again in the Kingdom of Heaven. I invite you to join our Church and me in prayer for your lost loved ones and for God's guidance in your own recovery from this great loss. And know that you do not have to grieve alone. We all stand together with you in prayer. In fact, prayer is our "powerhouse." It is what we do as believers — and we do it well. It is both necessary and needed medicine for all of us!

Let us begin this work today! We must engage in this enduring struggle, and we must face it together, one day at a time. This war against the evil of opioid addiction — or any addiction — will not be won quickly. But we must never give up the fight.

You will read below of some initial actions that we will take as a Diocese in the coming days. I have also included some very basic areas of involvement for our parishes. These are only the first steps in our response to this crisis. But they are important ones. I hope to make our endeavor one that grows and develops to respond effectively to the crisis as it changes the face of our Diocese, our state, and our nation. There is no time to waste — lives are at stake.

WHAT IS OUR ACTION PLAN AS A DIOCESE?

- This past fall I created a Bishop's Advisory Group on the Drug Crisis in order to assist in advising me as to the continuing development and implementation of a pastoral response to the opioid crisis and its evolving concerns for all in our area. Members of this group include civil officials, a county coroner, drug abuse experts, a recovering addict, and professionals directly involved in rehabilitation, such as counselors.

- This summer I will host educational and prayer opportunities at seven parishes across the Diocese to engage as many people as possible in drug prevention and the pastoral care follow-up effort. These gatherings in the different areas of our diocese will be advertised on Diocesan social media, in parishes and through *The Catholic Accent*.
- In the fall, the Diocese will provide ongoing educational opportunities for our parish and school staffs related to assisting families and individuals caught up in the opioid addiction epidemic.
- Through the services of Catholic Charities, we have and will continue to offer counseling, education, and referrals for addicts and their families. For help, please call 724-837-1840.
- We will assist in the development of family recovery groups or other similar support groups.
- The Diocesan Pro-Life and Social Ministry Office will provide ongoing information, which will enable those in our Diocesan Pastoral Center, parishes, and schools to advocate at the local, state, and federal levels for the necessary resources for prevention and treatment of drug abuse.
- The Office of Worship will provide preaching tools to pastors to address this issue in the lives of our people and parishes.

WHAT CAN PARISHES DO?

- Parishes are encouraged to work with existing neighborhood, nonprofit, and government organizations to promote safe communities and neighborhoods to be free from drugs. In our efforts, we do not intend to duplicate any existing programs. Rather, we hope to provide what the Church does best: prayer, education, and support.
- Parish Pastoral Councils and other parish leaders are encouraged to read, ponder and implement this pastoral letter according to their local circumstances.
- Priests and Deacons are invited to continue to offer spiritual support and, when appropriate, to speak about the drug abuse issue in homilies and during other formational opportunities.
- Parishes or regions of parishes are asked to consider developing support groups to help those addicted to opioids and their families to develop a deeper relationship with Jesus to give them strength.
- Parishes are asked to maintain a list of treatment centers and their phone numbers for referral purposes when the need arises.

- Using resources provided by the Diocese of Greensburg, all parishes are requested to find ways to educate and form the members of their parish and community to combat the opioid addiction epidemic in our homes and families.
- Parishes should consider holding ongoing opportunities for prayer and healing related to the addiction crisis, especially by interceding at Mass for the recovery of addicted people and the healing of their loved ones.

IN CONCLUSION

In November of 2016, the Pontifical Academy of Sciences held a meeting at the Vatican with international experts, led and inspired by Pope Francis. They related that to date, "... millions of victims globally have succumbed to addiction." The Academy said "... this is a contemporary version of slavery." It went on to say, "... addiction destroys autonomy and free will, a foreseeable outcome of using chemicals that artificially suppress and supplant natural brain reward systems in vulnerable people." Finally, the Academy stated, "... addiction especially threatens young people, as the vast majority of addictions can be traced to initiation during adolescence."

As your shepherd and your Bishop, I invite every person of good will in the Diocese of Greensburg to join with me in moving toward a solution to this problem. I realize that at some level there will always be addiction and pain until the return of Christ in glory. Until that time, no one needs to endure his or her pain alone. The Church must be present to all who suffer in any way. And remember, the Church includes all of us who believe in the Resurrection: clergy, counselors, doctors, nurses, social workers, legislators, law enforcement officials, and all of us who offer our prayers to God. Jesus can and wants to use his Church to move our communities from being places of death and despair to places of life and hope.

May we serve the Lord with gladness.

Your brother in Christ,



The Most Reverend Edward C. Malesic, JCL
Bishop of Greensburg

Given at the Pastoral Center of the Diocese of Greensburg on June 29, 2017, the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul.