

HOMILY SUN 29-A
“Let Go and Let God”

(Isaiah 45:1, 4-6; Psalm 96; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-5b; Matthew 22:15-21)

What is the difference between being addicted to alcohol, and being addicted to bingo? That answer is that those who are addicted to bingo remember their last blackout!

In his book *Dysfunctional Church*, Capuchin Franciscan Michael Crosby describes how our society has become an addictive society and argues that the same reality has affected the Church.

This is nothing new, however. It seems that Jesus had to deal with the same reality in the church of his time. In today’s gospel, he challenges the religious leaders to let go of the false gods of power, control and wealth and to put their relationship with God first.

A slogan of Alcoholics Anonymous puts it succinctly: “Let Go and Let God.”

In making his point, Crosby quotes Jim Henderson from an article he wrote in the *Dallas times Herald* entitled “Ethics Hits New Low in America.” What Henderson describes in 1989 is shocking:

Systems flawed by greed. Bankrupt morality. Skewed values. It was a time of fast bucks and decency be damned; a time when political appointees peddled their influence like street vendors and the stock market was rigged like a bad wrestling match. It was a time when men and women boasted of their perjury and sneered at the rules, waved the flag and thumped the Bible with one hand and stole from the national treasury with the other. From the stock exchanges of New York to the futures pits of Chicago; from college campuses to Indian reservations; from the white House and the federal bureaucracy to the defence industry assembly lines, ethics in America in the 1960’s took a bigger beating than Grenada, OPEC and the Berlin Wall combined. Avarice and corruption and sleaze surrounded the decade like swamp gas and the experts who try to fathom such human oddities are uncertain if the worst has passed. .

As election fever builds both in Canada and the United States, the role of religion in politics will once again become an issue. In America, how does one sort out the choice between a party that is more pro-life yet obviously married to an unjust and deadly military-industrial complex, and a party that seems more pro-choice yet obviously espouses a more peaceful foreign policy? In Canada, how does one find a party that will allow God back into politics in the first place?

The religious/political situation at the time of Jesus is interesting and pertinent. According to the New Interpreters Bible, the issue was not abstract doctrine about church and state, but rather an attempt by the Herodians and the Pharisees who have already decided to kill Jesus to now entrap him because he threatened to undermine their corrupt religious and political power and authority.

The tax in question is a specific head tax imposed by the Romans when Judea became a Roman province. This census tax triggered the nationalism that finally became the Zealot movement that led to the disastrous war of 66-70. There is irony here because in the debate Jesus actually affirms the

Herodians' position. Jesus teaches that it is permissible to pay taxes to the government as long as it does not conflict with the overriding authority of God. However, Matthew aligns them with Satan, who put Jesus to the test, and has them implicate themselves, as he does not have the hated coin yet they produce it themselves in the sacred space of the Temple, thus implicating themselves in the very economic system they are contesting.

What does this all have to do with the average church-going Catholic in the pews? May I suggest that we take Crosby's invitation to critically assess how we as a Church can clean up our own house first, as a way of positively influencing our society? It seems to me that that was what Jesus was trying to do in his day. We can hardly go wrong if we are following his example. He challenges us to go beyond the denial and blame that most often keeps peoples and organizations from even admitting the presence of any addictions in their midst.

There are many definitions of addiction and much discussion around them. For the purpose of this homily, Gerald May's definition is most helpful. He states that an addiction is a state of compulsion, obsession or preoccupation that enslaves a person's will and desire. Given such a definition, one can understand why May finds addictive behaviour and addicts everywhere. For him, "to be alive is to be addicted, and to be alive and addicted is to stand in need of grace." He speaks of attraction and aversion addictions which can affect persons, organizations and institutions.

My own definition of addiction is that an addiction is a pathological relationship with a mood-altering substance, event or person that has a major negative impact on one's life. As human beings, we are social animals with a strong need to belong and be in relationship. Because of our woundedness and insecurity, however, we gravitate towards unhealthy relationships that medicate our pain rather than deal with our need to heal ourselves and the hurtful family and communal systems which caused the hurt in the first place.

The addictions that affected the religious leaders of Jesus' time were wealth, power and control. We could add to that a strong tendency today towards religious addiction, which uses piety and religious practice to medicate pain rather than move towards the genuine personal and social liberation through faith and fellowship that Jesus came to initiate as the Kingdom of God.

Two of the Steps of the program of Alcoholics Anonymous are clear and simple guides to help us all move in a positive direction in starting to deal with our own tendency to religious addiction as well as an addiction to power, wealth and control.

Step Three invites us to make a decision to surrender our will and our lives over to God as we understand God. That sounds simple, yet how profound it is. Step Eleven adds the element of prayer to that decision: "Sought through prayer and meditation to improve my conscious contact with God, seeking only the knowledge of God's will for me and the power to carry it out." Again, how simple yet profound. These two steps alone, fully lived, would help us transform how we live our lives as an institutional Church.

To those who would question the wisdom of relying on a program of recovery from addiction to help us grow healthier as church, I would point to the first reading from Isaiah, where God uses the pagan king Cyrus to liberate and restore the Jews from exile in Babylon. That astounding reality was a

wake-up call to the religious leaders. It was their addiction to the false gods of wealth, prestige and power and their infidelity to the one God of Israel calling them into a way of humble faith, love and justice that caused the exile in the first place. I think it not at all unreasonable to think that God in our day would use a non-churchy program to help us be more faithful to him as his Church.

Another helpful reality on our own healing journey as Church would be greater dialogue within the Church. Pope Paul VI indicated eloquently in his encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* (*His Church*) that the church is essentially dialogical. Dialogue presumes a willingness in all parties to listen to each other's point of view; it assumes that one does not have all the answers.

I experienced an example of that kind of church leadership during the school for new bishops in Rome in 2006. Cardinal Christophe Schonborn of Vienna, who is my candidate for the next pope, was one of the presenters. He closed his comments to us new bishops with the admonition to listen to the people and be open to the truth that is often hidden from a bishop. One of his priests taught him that lesson. As a shepherd in his youth, this priest would most often lead the sheep. But sometimes when he was resting, he noticed that the sheep would head off without him. He would follow them and they would lead him to a grazing area that he would not have thought of on his own. The cardinal struck us as a good example of what he was teaching and inspired us to follow his example.

The Eucharist that we celebrate together today takes on a challenging tone in the light of today's gospel. Are we here simply to keep the Law and add up merits, or are we genuinely seeking to grow in a loving relationship with God that expresses itself in humble loving selfless service of all those in need.

Let us strive to lead lives free of addiction, and to make a healthy relationship with God, with others, ourselves and all of God's creation, our priority.