

## OPIOIDS AND ADDICTION: AN EMERGING CRISIS

Better late than never, right? Whether because I have not sufficiently understood or have failed to appreciate the seriousness of the crisis, the growing problem of **drug/opioid abuse** is only now seared into my consciousness. Couple that with my growing concern over the drug related activity at the bottom of the hill from the Cathedral and I'm as upset as I am concerned, frustrated as I am motivated to help. The term "opioid" is a descriptor that includes both illegal drugs (e.g. heroin) as well as prescription pain killers (e.g. oxycodone codeine, morphine) that have a potential for being highly addictive. I do not believe it is within my purview to propose simplistic solutions to manifestly complex issues. But consider this— **drug overdose deaths** spiked from 52,000 to **59,000** last year (+19%), the largest annual jump ever recorded in the U.S., with no end in sight. More than 20,000 of those are from prescription pain relievers. In 1990, there were fewer than 10,000 drug overdose deaths in this country. What happened?

This is clearly a crisis, plain and simple. It is alarming and surely ought to be a non-partisan issue, as it cuts across all typical demographics: urban and rural, young and old, black and white, rich or poor. It is a public health issue and we cannot stand by idly. In the past two years, I have witnessed first-hand a slowly but surely developing problem near the Cathedral campus (and elsewhere), manifesting itself by the number of people occupying the median spaces near freeway on ramps and exits. I have met with three individuals who have fallen on hard times, two of whom even slept for a night in our backyard. (They apologized!) Guess what all three told me? They were afraid to walk down the hill towards I-35 because of the active drug use occurring there. Walk down by the old Selby Streetcar tunnel (closed up for decades), and you will see multiple tents night after night.

Mind you, the new **Catholic Charities Higher Ground** residence that opened this past January includes an emergency shelter with space for over 200 people, and an additional 193 new permanent housing units. Still, some are either unable to find shelter there or, in some cases, are not allowed. As they ought, Catholic Charities has a thorough intake process, to ensure that emergency shelter residents are neither a danger to themselves or to others. But they'll bend over backwards to assist those who truly desire to be helped. Some choose to go their own way and I have sensed the frustration in our police and first responders with this reality. From the discarded syringes found nearby, it is painfully obvious there is active drug use not too far from here. (I can see the tents pitched down the hill when I go out for early morning training runs on the steps near the James J. Hill House). Others see them too, and while to date we have not seen this activity on our own property, I am justifiably concerned and plan on attending some community meetings to try to be part of a solution. I can no longer quietly observe from afar. It's here in our midst and we must respond.

Here's the proverbial \$64,000 question— "How are we helping people either by turning a blind eye to makeshift encampments or by giving cash when we have at least some reasonable suspicion that these funds may be used to feed a destructive habit?" I think that drug treatment programs are more effective than incarceration, and I believe with all my heart that the downtrodden deserve our attention and assistance. But I also believe that when people are in the grips of addiction, our offer of help is insufficient if they lack the will to get better. No matter what programs are offered, in order to bring about real and lasting change, a personal decision is demanded. You **cannot force** an addict to change; it will fall on deaf ears.

Still, we ought to be there to help people pick up the pieces if they show signs that they are open. I recall a discussion last winter with a young man who came seeking spiritual help. Once he began to trust me, he revealed that he had left an in-patient treatment program for young adults. By the end of our second meeting, he indicated a willingness to go back— I even called his mother! Not convinced that he would follow through, I seized the moment. I informed him that I had just enough time to get him back to his program, but only if we left immediately. I was not exaggerating, I had to get back for Saturday confessions; I made it in the nick of time. I hope he utilized his second chance, and returned home to where he could find support from family.

Now, what about those on the freeways off ramps? I caution you about the advisability of giving cash to people on nearby corners. I myself have chosen **not to give** money to those standing by exit ramps because I have little assurance about how this money will be used. In my opinion (and I confirmed this with Mr. Tim Marx, CEO of Catholic Charities), it is far safer to donate to agencies with a solid track record of serving the poor, including those with addictions. They are positioned to offer lasting help to all who are in trouble from opioids or alcohol, as well as the poor due to myriad other factors. These are our brothers and sisters in Christ– may they truly feel the love of God, and know of our care and concern for their health and well-being.

- The **Solemnity of the Assumption**, a holy day of obligation, is this Tuesday the 15<sup>th</sup> of August. An anticipatory Mass will be offered on Monday August 14 at 5:15 p.m., followed by Tuesday Masses at **7:00 a.m.** (for workers), **12:00 Noon** (with the Children’s choir), and **5:15 p.m.** The 12:00 Noon Mass may be a perfect opportunity to bring the whole family. We hope to see you here.
- American residents in Rome and travelers to the eternal city now have a new Church designated for English speaking Catholics. The Paulist Fathers have been given pastoral care over St. Patrick’s Church, located just steps from the American Embassy, making it quite convenient. Sadly, Santa Susanna’s, which had been home to U.S. Catholics since 1922, was no longer available after a dispute with the religious order living on its premises. A fresh start in a new church was thought to be the best solution.
- Time flies...It was 25 years ago this week that the U.S. Olympic **Men’s Basketball “Dream Team”** won a gold medal in Barcelona, going 8-0 with an average margin of victory of 44 points. Arguably the greatest collection of athletes on any one team in sporting history, eleven out of the twelve players would be enshrined in the Hall of Fame. It forever changed the NBA landscape, in no small part due to the international exposure by this Olympics. In 1992, there were 26 foreign born players on NBA rosters. Today, there are 115.
- The U.S. birth rate has dropped to its lowest number in more than a century, down 1% from 2015 to 2016. This represents 12.4 births per 1000 population. That ratio per 1000 was 21.7 in my birth year. Though there were 189 million Americans then, still more babies were born than in 2016, from a current population of 323 million. Of the 3,941,109 live births in 2016, 40.3% of those were delivered to unmarried women. Not a promising trend.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,  
Rector