

13TH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME, Year B

Yesterday I was main celebrant and homilist at the abbey for the feast of St. Cyril of Alexandria, a man who was in some respects not altogether exemplary. Among other things, as archbishop he made some extremely harsh pronouncements against Jews and pagans that historians think contributed to rioting and even deaths in Alexandria, especially during the early years of his episcopacy. Nevertheless, there was also a lot of sound teaching in Cyril's works, especially in the so-called "festal letters" that he had sent around each year at the beginning of Lent. These regularly included not only an eloquent account of God's love for us as seen in all the events of salvation history but also a clear summons about how we are to respond to that love. For example, Cyril ended one of those letters with these words: "Let us then hold to love for one another, showing ourselves more intent upon hospitality, distinguishing ourselves in concern for the poor, remembering those who are in prison, as though [we were] in prison with them, and [also remembering] those who are ill-treated.... In a word, let us cherish every virtue.... Thus we shall inherit with the saints the kingdom of heaven with Christ Jesus our Lord."

This morning I want to talk about one way in which we can show that love for others. Our first reading, from the Book of Wisdom, begins with the words that "God did not make death ... but fashioned all things that they might have being. And the creatures of the world are wholesome, and there is not a destructive drug among them, nor any domain of the netherworld on earth" (Wis. 1:13-15). If we are to respond properly to these words, it means that we, too, should do whatever we can to promote life. It may be that we cannot literally bring back to life someone like the little girl in today's Gospel, who got up at Jesus' words *Talitha koum*: "Little girl, I say to you, arise." But there is a lot of spiritual death and hopelessness in our very city, some of it strikingly illustrated in an article that you may have seen in yesterday's *Washington Post* about the use of synthetic drugs in an open-air drug market located just a few blocks from

the U.S. Capitol building.¹ If ever there was a proof that government alone cannot solve this sort of problem, this is it: synthetic drugs that are making people psychotic and sometimes violent being sold within a short walking distance of the very seat of American government.

The really striking thing about that article was the way it showed *why* people turn to such drugs in the first place. It's all related to what the reporter called "the larger city scourges of unemployment, homelessness and violence,... where the hopelessness seems to lean right up against the walls of the Labor Department, where the users and dealers shelter in the building's tunnel." One man named Darnell Thompson was quoted as saying: "Everyone out here in this society, we're looking for some way to escape." He admitted he uses the synthetic drug K2 daily and said that in a sense it works by giving him a quick high. But he added: "But [it works] only for a second, because when my high is gone, I'm still here. Same situation." He has even been through treatment programs, but he said the results are always the same: "I came out of the program and came right back here." He has been able to stay off drugs for a month, but the rest was what he called "a foregone conclusion": "You put me back into the society you took me out of. Now what do you want me to do?" The reporter also quoted a shelter guard who said that it's not enough for the police simply to try to stop the selling and distribution of such drugs because, in his words, "They're [selling] it because of lot of them need money. They're trying to pay rent."

There's no doubt that reading articles like that can leave one depressed, but such pieces also present us with a welcome challenge to do something, even if whatever we can do is far from everything. It's obvious that something like drug use is intimately connected with a whole skein of issues, surely including not only ones mentioned in the article, such as unemployment and homelessness, but also by the fact that many young people are growing up in homes where

they may not even know who their father is and where their mother is so busy trying to earn enough money to support the family that she doesn't have the time or energy to give proper supervision to her children. I'm so pleased that at our abbey school we have a high proportion of minority students who are able to receive enough financial aid to enable them to get the kind of education that is a key factor in escaping the imprisoning, even death-dealing environment in which they might otherwise be trapped. I'm also fairly sure I've heard that some of you do tutoring for persons who need help with one or another aspect of schooling, such as reading or math. If that is so, I encourage you to stick with it—and I encourage others to consider taking it up. If you simply help one person get out of a stifling, imprisoning environment, you have brought new life to that person even as, in a different way, Jesus brought new life to the little girl in the Gospel. May our reception of the life-giving sacrament of the Eucharist this morning help us to become bearers of new life in whatever ways are most in accord with our individual abilities and circumstances.

1 Abigail Hauslohner, "Scourge of drugs thrives near the Capitol," *Washington Post*, June 27, 2015. All subsequent quotations are from this article.