

AN ANNIVERSARY—OF SORTS

Last weekend is an anniversary weekend for me. Thanksgiving weekend 1985 was the last time I took an alcoholic drink. That was thirty-five years ago. No one in this church today knew me then. I was a very different person. Likable but out of control. That Thanksgiving I went to my mom's home early in the afternoon. My brothers arrived in time to watch the football games and we shared a couple of beers. There were more drinks and snacks before dinner and some wine with dinner. After dinner and dessert there were after dinner drinks. I remember getting back to the Rectory in Lansdowne around ten o'clock that night. And then I did something that made great sense (to me) at that time. I fixed myself a double gin martini before going to bed. When I went to bed, sadly, I was drunk.

In the morning I awoke with a hangover. Not the first time. But this time there was something else. This time I sensed that there was something that was happening to me in my body because of the alcohol. I felt as if my body was beginning to change physiologically. It scared me. I knew I had a problem and that the problem was getting worse. I probably had had a drinking problem for a couple of years by that time. I was intent on not letting anybody know. I was thirty-eight years old. I was not happy. No one really knew that because I wore the mask of a happy person, a happy priest but I was not happy. I did not like myself. I did not love myself. As a matter of fact, there were some days when I hated myself, hated who I was and what I was doing. There were even moments of self-loathing. And I was the cause. I was doing this to myself. If someone else had been doing this to me and making me feel like this, I would have hated them. But I was doing it—to myself.

I also knew something else—two things actually. I did not want to do this anymore. And. I could not stop on my own. I literally got down on my knees and begged God for help. I did not want to do this anymore. I asked the Blessed Mother, the Mother of priests, to help me. I started saying the rosary. And there was just one other person in whom I confided and that person was just the right person, giving me the support and encouragement that I needed. The Lord and His Mother did help me. Not only do I no longer drink but the very urge to drink is gone. The desire to pick up a drink does not exist in me anymore. It is gone—by God's grace and Mary's intervention. My part was to affirm over and over again that I didn't want to do this anymore and that I did not have to. Some have said to me that I drink wine at Mass. That is not a drink. That is the Blood of Christ. When I pick up the chalice I am not picking up a drink, I am picking up the Blood of the Lord. I believe that.

But here's the thing. I had to get right with myself. I had to be truthful with myself. I had to stop saying: "I do not have a problem," when I obviously did. I had to stop making excuses for the accidents, for my lack of memory about how or when I got home at night, about not doing the job that was mine. I had to stop rationalizing, had to stop pretending. In other words, I had to stop lying. I had to stop lying to other people in my life. Most of all, I had to stop lying to myself. I had to stop the denial.

There were two addictions in me and I have since learned that addictions often come in pairs. The first addiction was to alcohol. For many people alcohol is fine, even good. For me it is poison. It did not start out as poison. It started out simply enough. I would take a drink to be social. I would have a drink to relax. I would then drink to unwind and relieve the tension of work and ministry. When I drank I laughed. And I laughed a lot. Then I got sloppy. Then I got slovenly. Then I got deadly. Poison. For me, alcohol is like drinking poison.

The second addiction was to lying. When Pilate asks Jesus if he is a king, Jesus responds by saying that “king” is the word that Pilate is using. Jesus says that the reason why he came was to “witness to the truth.” I had stopped doing that. I had begun to lose my integrity. I could feel myself beginning to disintegrate, my center was not holding. My drinking was beginning to cost me everything—my sobriety, my priesthood, my Catholic faith, my sense of identity, my relationships and my self-worth. I was lying often and living in deception.

Getting sober, stopping drinking, was just one step. Choosing not to lie, not to live in the world of illusion but to live in God’s truth was the second. Today is the Second Sunday of Advent. We are to prepare the way of the Lord who is Truth and Life. If you are living in an addiction or in more than one addiction; if you are living in the world of deception, living a lie; if you are caught up in the world of denial then I am here to testify to this truth. If you truly desire not to be in your addiction, beg the Lord to take it from you. I am here to testify to this truth that Jesus Christ will set you free if you really desire to be free. One of the things I found was that drinking did not have hold of me as I would often say. I was holding tight to the drinking. I was clutching it tight because I did not think that I could live without it, or function without it. I could not remember the last day that I had not had a drink.

The Lord has truly set me free and I believe that He will truly set you free if you really want to be free, want it more than anything. And when He does, you will own your truth. And when He does liberate you then you will truly be free—and in that moment Christ will reign in your heart as He does in mine. Christ our Lord and King!