

Alcoholism – heart disease

by priest George Aquaro

And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. (Matthew 16:17-19)

When we think of alcoholism, do we think of this Scripture? We should, for in it our Lord Jesus Christ promises victory and freedom over sin and death (in other words, hell). Who could say that alcoholism is not a type of hell? Does it not cause untold suffering to our people, wrecking families and leaving its victims without hope?

If Christ saves us from slavery through the confession of faith found in the Church, then it is only through the Church that men can be saved from the hell of alcoholism. The spiritual liberation the alcoholic seeks to free him from the bondage of drinking comes through the Church. Only the Church can prevail against hell in this world, not any individual Christian. So, the treatment for alcoholism begins and ends in the Church.

You see, the experience of those alcoholics who have been liberated from out-of-control drinking continuously points back to the teachings of the Orthodox Church. Only when an alcoholic confesses that he needs to repent and be saved by God alone, as the Church teaches, is he ready to begin the process of recovery from alcoholism.

The spiritual disease of alcoholism, like the other passions that torment fallen man, is as incurable as our disposition to sin. But, the Holy Fathers teach us that we can pull away from sin by allowing God to treat the passions.

The PNA of the Romanian Orthodox Church has worked diligently to organize and provide training for clergy and social counselors on how to use the teachings of the Church to bring sobriety to Romanian alcoholics. By learning to look at alcoholism through the teachings of the Church rather than through a secular mindset, many alcoholics in Romania are discovering the joyous gift of sobriety.

The obsession to drink is based on the human craving for the joy and comfort we only find in God. For many people, their suffering due to their separation from God, coupled with their guilt and shame, drives them to drink as a means of escaping sin. However, once this deadly alternative to God is set in motion, it soon carries the alcoholic away to a point where he can no longer stop drinking even if he wants to. He is a prisoner, having thrown away the key to his freedom.

In the Gospel of St. Matthew, the Church binds and looses sin, and so the Church is responsible to lose the bonds of alcoholics by teaching them to turn to God through repentance and humility. The PNA fulfills this divine command through the Apostolic Authority of the Holy Synod of Romania, which has authorized the PNA to teach and preach the Gospel to alcoholics in Romania. When alcoholics turn to the PNA for help, they are aligning themselves with the Church and ultimately with their merciful and loving God, who will grant them healing and freedom.

The chains of alcoholism come off when alcoholics submit themselves to God. Is there anything that God cannot do? He desires to help us, but we must first submit. When an alcoholic submits himself to the Church, the PNA's program will help him discover the path of sobriety. What is the PNA's program. Very simply, it is a path to recovery using the ascetical practices of the Church which have been organized in such a fashion as to best suit the needs of alcoholics in the world. You do not need to live in a monastery to be an ascetic. All Christians know asceticism: we fast, we pray, we give alms. We help others, we confess our sins, we repent.

Whereas the average person does these things because he wants to, the alcoholic learns that these are not options. They are the very means of his survival. Only through God's grace can an alcoholic be separated from the domination of alcohol.

What is the National Anti-drug Program?

The PNA's program is, above all things, a practical program for the implementation of the teachings of the Church in daily life. Alcoholics learn to not only to recognize their sins, but to dig more deeply into those fears that control our behavior. Only when faith in God cures these fears to alcoholics experience the release from their bondage. Romania is a spiritual nation. The people of this land have a profound sense of God's grace and love. For this reason, alcoholism is such a dogged problem. The people yearn for God's mercy and love. They seek his grace and comfort. They pour into monasteries and fill the churches seeking Him. At the same time, others fall into the trap of the bottle.

Alcoholics are not evil. They are just like any other person who yearns deeply for God. While their behavior is sinful, we must understand that they are at the mercy of the devil until they decide to follow the teachings of the Church and surrender to God.

We faithful of the Church are obliged not only to help alcoholics return to God, but to also learn about the treatment of this spiritual illness. We may find that taking up the ascetical practices of recovering alcoholics helps us draw nearer to God and liberates us from the other passions: pride, gluttony, laziness, lust, envy, anger and greed.

Recovery from alcoholism is the mark of God's triumph over sin and death. When you encounter an alcoholic in recovery, know that you are meeting a man or woman who has been touched by God's power. Like someone who has escaped an 'inner gulag,' the alcoholic is one who has a greater appreciation for life than most other people.

The gates of hell will not prevail against the Church, neither will they prevail against those alcoholics who flee to the Church for help.

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