In Difficult Times, Lean Into Our Faith And Claim Its Benefits

I want to place the current concerns about the increase in mental and emotional health issues among today's youth in the context of a culture that is increasingly adopting a more secular way of looking at life. I want to compare that with our Catholic and Christian worldview and explore the consequences both can have on youth and their struggles with mental and emotional health.

There is a growing number of people, many of whom are young adults, who do not believe that there is a God and an afterlife. Consequently, they are left living with the anguish of being alive without having a purpose in life, let alone hope that there is life after death. Some atheists will say they can live happy and successful lives without religion, with some equating religion with insanity. However, they may think differently when the reality of death is on their doorstep.

I recall being on a plane with a woman traveling to New Orleans. Her husband had died, and she was going to represent him at the dedication ceremony for the newly built World War II Museum that he had a role in founding. She started to weep and shared with me that they did not believe in an afterlife. The thought of never seeing her husband again brought her great anguish that would now replace her husband as her constant companion.

St. Augustine observed that our hearts are restless until they rest in God. We are made for God, to be with God in heaven. Unbelief will not quench that desire. Denying it will not make it go away.[1]

I want to point out why our Catholic Christian faith can affect our emotional and mental health for the better. We believe in God, our Heavenly Father, who has loved us into existence, knows us by name, given us a purpose in life and the goal of enjoying his presence forever in a dimension beyond this one called heaven.

Compare struggling with mental and emotional health issues against that backdrop and doing the same, believing there is no God, and living with the anguish of being alive without having a purpose, let alone hope for life after death. As we will see, faith does not spare us from suffering in life but can offer us consolation, strength, and hope when we do. When our students are wrestling with mental and emotional health issues, we want them to lean into their faith to claim it and its benefits.

There is always the temptation for students and adults to put their faith, religious beliefs, and practices in one box and their struggles in another with "never the twain shall meet."[2] Along with seeking the help of professionals in the field of mental health and taking the prescribed medication when needed, we want them to seek the Lord's help that is provided when they pray, celebrate the sacraments, go to Mass, study theology, learn about the lives of the saints, and serve others. I should add that the Lord works through healthcare professionals, and we should view their help as an expression of God's providence. That is an example of the twain meeting!

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[1] Charles Taylor cites a British novelist, Julian Barnes, as an example of being secular. Barnes grew up in post-Christian Britain. He never went to Church, had no religious experience, no religious identity, and had not received any religious formation at all. In 2008, he published a memoir entitled *"Nothing to Be Frightened Of."* About three times in the book, he says, "I don't believe in God, but I miss him." Three times.

[2] The adage means that two things are so different that they can never come together. The word twain comes from an Old English word, *twegen*, meaning two.

Mental and emotional struggles may make it difficult to garner the strength to do what I just described. That is especially true when coping with depression. Still, we encourage our students to ask for God's help. I recommend holding a rosary and imagining holding Mary's hand or a cross/crucifix and Christ helping you carry yours. Those are both ways of praying. We teach our students that if all they can do is cry for help given their present circumstances, they should do it. We encourage our students to find solace, knowing that the Church prays for them when, in their weakness, they find doing so next to impossible.

We do not want our students to lose hope when amid hardships they feel will never end. We want them to remember that they were created out of love and for a particular purpose. Whatever suffering they endure will be used by God to strengthen them for the task that has their name on it. Salvation history is full of examples of heroes of the faith enduring great hardships, overcoming them with God's help, growing in wisdom and strength because of them, and fulfilling God's purpose for them.

That is why we teach them about the saints, who can impart much wisdom about how to endure suffering. An example of that is St. Ignatius of Loyola. He had dreamed of being a knight and going into battle to win fame and glory. On May 20, 1521, a cannonball broke one leg and wounded the other. During the long recovery from his injuries, he read about the lives of the saints. He underwent a profound conversion from seeking heroic victories on the battlefield to serving heroically Christ. He went on to found the Society of Jesus, also known as the Jesuits.

The lesson here is that St. Ignatius sought greater intimacy with God when he lost everything. Amid a painful and challenging situation, he shows us we should turn to Christ and not away from him.

Let us do that now and turn toward Jesus, our Lord, and Savior, who suffered and died on the cross for us. Before his crucifixion, he was under immense scrutiny by his detractors, who certainly caused him tremendous mental and emotional stress. That was multiplied to the nth degree while suffering on the cross. Yet, Jesus warned us that being his disciples requires us to imitate him and carry our cross daily. We are to unite our suffering with His on the cross so that he can give us his courage and strength to persevere.

An aspect of his strength comes from believing that our suffering has meaning. We do not have to endure "dumb suffering," which makes no sense. Instead, Jesus gives us the power to make sense of our suffering by offering it up in reparation for our sins, for the poor souls in purgatory, to relieve the suffering of someone we know and love, or for our Lord to use our suffering in whatever way he deems fitting. We can offer up our suffering to bring Jesus some consolation for the suffering he endured on the cross for our sins. God can take our suffering and apply it retroactively to Jesus's suffering on the cross. That is our way of comforting Jesus by offering our present suffering so that it may lessen his in some way.

These are lessons that Catholic schools and Marist School teach students about how to endure hardships that affect their mental and emotional well-being. During those difficult times, we want them to lean into their faith and claim its benefits to help them in their struggles. We want them to hold on to their faith, even if by the skin of their teeth. That is when they should pray for an increase in faith, which I will touch upon in the following reflection.