

**Homily for Ash Wednesday
February 22, 2023**

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois**

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

An article in last weekend's issue of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL reported that "Teens' Mental-Health Distress Could Be Worse Than CDC Data Suggest."

According to the Center for Disease Control's latest statistics, which are drawn from its biennial Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 57% of high-school females reported experiencing persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, up from 36% a decade ago. For males that age, feelings of hopelessness rose to 29% from 21%. For females, 30% said they had seriously considered suicide, up from 19%. Thinking about suicide is of course a warning sign, but the link between thinking about it and following through isn't as clear as one might imagine. Despite high rates of young females thinking about suicide, the rates of suicide are significantly higher among young males.¹

These statistics are indeed troubling, but in response to them the CDC proposes all the wrong solutions. According to the CDC, “Schools should prioritize teaching kids about sexual consent, managing emotions and asking for what they need. In addition, school environments need to be safer and more inclusive for LGBTQ+ students. Schools should encourage gender and sexuality alliances, provide safe spaces and people for LGBTQ+ students to go to for support, and ensure enforcement of antiharassment policies.”²

What the CDC fails to recognize is that it is these very problematic behaviors that are themselves contributing to the students’ sadness. Moreover, it is not only young people who are experiencing these emotional difficulties, but people of all ages face similar struggles in life.

In contrast to the CDC’s flawed remedies, a new book by Father Robert Spitzer, S.J., shows that the truth is the opposite of what our secular culture offers. His book, *The Moral Wisdom of the Catholic Church: A Defense of Her Controversial Moral Teachings* (Ignatius Press, 2022) uses secular statistical studies to demonstrate that Catholic moral teachings, even from a scientific standpoint, help human beings to flourish. Gathering data from universities, general psychiatry, medical institutes, and general

survey organizations such as Pew Research, Gallup Research, and Harris Poll, this book shows that going against foundational Christian doctrines, from marriage to the sanctity of unborn life, leads to significant increases in depression, anxiety, substance abuse, familial tensions, suicidal contemplation.

Many people today, particularly the young, are embarrassed by the Church's moral teaching. For them, it is only an outdated expression of hatred or disgust. Yet nothing could be further from the truth. Sin is what degrades man and kills his joy, and a moral life is a life of love. If we tell the truth about destructive lifestyles, we can rescue our loved ones from a life of darkness, helping to bring about a shift in our culture.

The bottom line: our permissive and self-indulgent society makes people sad; hedonistic pleasure is not the same as happiness; life with Christ is what makes us happy!

With today's observance of Ash Wednesday, Lent has begun. Whatever penances or spiritual practices we have in mind for this Lenten season, they should have one singular goal: how can I grow closer to Jesus Christ? This is the key point, for it is in right relationship with Jesus Christ that we find true happiness.

In the gospel passage that we have just heard from the Gospel of Saint Matthew (Mt 6:1-6, 16-18), Jesus gave a very clear instruction: “When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites.” The Greek term *hypocrites* referred to actors who put on a mask and play a role, seeking the approval of their audience. Jesus is telling us that when we perform our acts of piety, we should not be doing so to garner public praise. The only audience that counts is the One who sees us in secret!

I would like to suggest another reason why we should not look gloomy when we engage in our Lenten practices of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. The fact is that these penitential practices are not intended to make us sad, but to bring us to the joy of a closer relationship with Christ our Redeemer!

Our responsorial psalm today is from Psalm 51, the great penitential psalm that begins with the plea, “Have mercy on me, O God, in your goodness; in the greatness of your compassion wipe out my offense. Thoroughly wash me from my guilt, and of my sin cleanse me.” Just a few verses later, the psalm proclaims the joy that comes when we acknowledge our offenses and our sins are forgiven: “Give me back the joy of your salvation, and a willing spirit sustain in me.”

May our steadfast observance of Lent gain pardon for our sins and newness of life after the likeness of our Risen Lord, who gives us the great joy of receiving Him now in this Eucharist.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Josh Zumbrun, "Teens' Mental-Health Distress Could Be Worse Than CDC Data Suggest," THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, February 17, 2023, accessed online at https://www.wsj.com/articles/teens-mental-health-distress-could-be-worse-than-cdc-data-suggest-eb09091f?st=0djccm37k9qjk35&reflink=desktopwebshare_permalink.

² Sarah Toy, "Teen Girls Experiencing Record Levels of Sadness and Suicide Risk, CDC Says," THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, February 13, 2023, accessed online at https://www.wsj.com/articles/teen-girls-experiencing-record-levels-of-sadness-and-suicide-risk-cdc-says-b30b7e8e?st=36vpbqbfpy3mxgv&reflink=desktopwebshare_permalink.