



Homily Thoughts for Mental Illness Awareness Week

Mental Illness Awareness Week begins Sunday, October 4th as the “Year of the Family” proclaimed by Pope Francis winds down. Pope Francis has called the Church to proclaim the Gospel by confronting the emerging pastoral needs facing the family such as marriage, family life, education of children, and the role of the family in the life of the church in today’s world.

The readings for the weekend beginning Mental Illness Awareness Week also are oriented to the family. In Genesis, the Lord created a “suitable partner” for man. Creating a woman from Adam’s rib, two became one flesh. The beginning of the family. The Gospel of Mark speaks of the sanctity and continuity of the family.

One pastoral need facing the family as well as the parish family and larger community—is the need for a better understanding of mental illness. What a mental illness is and what it is not. An awareness that mental illness is a biological brain disorder—a physical disorder, not a choice, not a weakness, and not bad parenting.

Mental illness can be life-threatening and disabling for the patient, and life changing and traumatic for the family. People with a significant mental illness such as schizophrenia, bi-polar disorder, and major depression have a disturbance of brain chemistry. Irregular brain function causes people with these diseases to perceive their environment differently. With the onset of these diseases come difficulties in thinking, concentration, and organization.

Mental illnesses are treatable. With appropriate effective medication and a wide range of services tailored to their needs, most people who live with serious mental illnesses will be able to find a reduction in symptoms and a more satisfying measure of achievement and independence.

People with mental illness and their families face a stigma that they somehow caused this and are at fault. It is a sign of disgrace. Somehow they are not as good or smart as others. Mental illness, despite research, learning, and education is still perceived by many people (1/3rd) as a character flaw, a moral fault, or a sign of weakness, rather than what it is—a disease of the brain.



Mental Illness Awareness Week calls us to end the stigma that surrounds one of every five families. Yes, one of every five families will have a loved one that has a significant mental illness. The roughly twenty families out of every one hundred families in a parish will be reluctant to talk about or disclose the illness because of stigma. Stigma also prevents many people with mental illness from seeking help. As much or more than any illness, mental illness involves the entire family.

*Do not be afraid to talk about mental illness. A homily about

mental illness that conveys understanding and compassion will bring those with mental illness and their families out of the woodwork.

* Avoid words or phrases that add to stigmatizing those with mental illness. This can be harder than you think.

*Include intercessory prayers for those with a mental illness. This lets them know they are included in our prayers.

*Speak of how all people are created in the image of God and none are to be excluded from God's love.

*Understand that some with mental illness may need accommodations. For some it is difficult to sit still. They may need to walk around in the vestibule. For others being with a crowd of people will be too much for them to handle. They too will need to be in a quieter spot. Some may wear headphones to help drown out voices in their heads.

*Be ready for referrals to professionals in the community. Do not go where you might not have lived experience.