

Ecstasy

by Deacon Emmanuel Stamatiou

The use of the word ecstasy these days could hardly be associated with the Church. Ecstasy is more than likely to be associated with the designer drug, which was heavily used before heroin re-emerged on the drug scene some two years ago. We know the consequence of drug use in our community. In Perth there have been some 50 deaths this year attributed to heroin overdose among young people. This is a very high figure given our city's population of 1.2 million. The trend is a disturbing worldwide problem. In Greece, the number of deaths due to drugs was 146 in 1994 compared with just 10 deaths in 1985. By comparison, in Germany the number of drug related deaths grew from 224 in 1985 to 1624 in 1994.

These figures however represent only a small component of drug related deaths. This is because the drug deaths category only includes illicit drugs. When you include the licit drugs of alcohol, cigarettes and prescription drugs these figures would be significantly higher. The number of deaths due to illicit drug use represents less than 3% of the total number of drug caused deaths. When you consider the harm associated with drug use such as caused by accidents, injuries, the toxic effects on the body and soon, the cost to the community is very high. Studies have shown that 15-25% of all hospital admissions are related to harm associated with the excessive use of alcohol. Imagine the billions of dollars involved with this.

A drug can broadly be defined as any substance that alters the mood or state of mind of the user. The dangers associated with drug use are that it affects our senses and judgment. In this regard, drug use can have disastrous consequences in relation to the responsibility we carry to care for others and ourselves. Imagine drug use among workers utilising heavy industrial equipment or a surgeon in the operating theatre. There is an increased awareness of these problems among employers, leading to recommendations for drug testing in the workplace. A recent case reported in the media was with BHP in Port Hedland due to drug use among the workers.

The other major problem with drugs is that we can develop a physical dependence on them. This means that our self-control is severely compromised when we become dependent on substances. Nicotine in cigarettes for example is now known to be one of the most addictive of drugs. Our self-control is also severely compromised when we become intoxicated, losing our dignity and respect.

Heavenly ecstasy

In contrast to the ugly scene of alcohol and drug abuse in our community today, the early Fathers of our Church spoke of spiritual ecstasy. St. Gregory of Sinai described this state as the "Total elevation of the **soul's** powers towards the majesty of divine glory..." (Philokalia v4, pp 222). Ecstasy as defined by the Fathers of the Church is "the going out from oneself and from all created things towards God, under the influence of eros or

intense longing. A man does not attain ecstasy by his own efforts, but is drawn out of himself by the power of God's love. Ecstasy implies passing beyond all the conceptual thinking of the discursive reason." (Philokalia v4, pp 429).

The going out from oneself can only be achieved through love; a love for God and for others. This love compels those who love to belong not to themselves but to those whom they love. It was this love that inspired St. Paul to write "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me" (Galatians 2:20). St. Maximus the Confessor states that the highest mystical experience is ecstasy. This experience is reserved for those who have been granted the grace to be purified of the passions and be adorned with the virtues. This divine purification leads to the illumination or enlightenment of the inner self through the nous (the eye of the soul or mind).

The higher plane that people seek with drugs is a potentially destructive and evil force that darkens our mind and has the capacity to control the physical, social and physiological self. This condition separates us from God and places us on the path leading to destruction. It is no accident that alcohol and drug abuses associated with self-centredness, death, violence, disease, theft, accidents, injuries, and criminal activity. Can we say that these are not products of evil?

On the other hand the higher spiritual plane sought by the saints (the faithful) of the Church is the exact opposite of the ugliness associated with alcohol and drug abuse. For this involves us in the process of healing and the enlightenment of our soul leading to a state of ecstasy and joy. This condition unites us with God and leads us to the path of salvation. This process of healing is associated with self-denial, love, life, peace, kindness and responsibility for others and us before God. Can we say these are not divine fruits and gifts? It is natural for people to seek a higher plane. This is because man was created in God's image and He breathed life into him (Gen. 2:7). God created us not for death but for eternity. When people lose knowledge of God, they lose the path leading to their eternity. They cease to have a personal relationship with God through Christ the Saviour, who is the "Way, the Truth and the Life" (John 14:6). To seek a higher plane without God is impossible. This is why everything in the world holds false promise whilst everything of God fulfills all promise and hope. Therefore all things which are seen and understood without the knowledge and remembrance of God will prove themselves counterfeit. It is no wonder that people use drugs when seeking a higher plane, be it to fill some emptiness in their lives, or through ignorance, grief lack of self confidence, curiosity depression or some impulsive act.

St. Maximus the Confessor said "Evil is corruptible because corruption is the nature of evil, which does not possess any true existence whatsoever. Goodness is incorruptible because it exists eternally and never ceases to be, and watches over everything in which it dwells" (Philokalia v2, pp. 224).

Drugs confuse and threaten parents because they do not know how to protect their children against them. However, if we teach our children from an early age the Love and Word of God (that is if they are raised spiritually and not just physically in a material world), they are given the grace, blessings and protection of God. His Church is

not just the place to visit on Sundays, the Church is the Body of Christ that heals and protects us. Let us understand that we are servants and friends of the "Living God" who teaches the meaning of true love. Let us not seek solutions to our daily problems and fears without Him. "I have not greater joy", said St. John the Theologian than to hear that my children walk in truth." (3 John:5).

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