

Against the Current
July 2011

Reality Sucks!

Not long ago I saw a video on You-tube - "Friday", by Rebecca Black. The essential message was "Friday is the beginning of the weekend, and that means we're going to have fun and party"!

Watching the video and listening to the words it wasn't hard to miss the fact that "partying" was the most important and meaningful thing in the lives of these teenagers. And I can't tell you how sad and sorry I felt for them.

Think about it. The word "partying" usually means some combination of drinking, doing drugs, having sex, dancing, listening to loud music, etc. The goal of this kind of partying is usually escapism. It's sad when the most important thing in a person's life consists of doing or consuming something to forget about their everyday life. It means that their life isn't joyful or fulfilling. I don't see how you can't feel sorry for such people.

Just to be clear, I'm not coming out against drinking alcohol (as long as you're of age, and don't overindulge), listening to music, or dancing, as there's nothing wrong with any of them when not taken to excess. Sexual activity is best restricted to a committed, monogamous, heterosexual marriage which has been blessed in Church. Drugs should be avoided, not just because using drugs is against the law (like underage drinking), but because (like excessive drinking) drug use can easily lead to addiction, illness, and family breakdown.

But escapism is an old story. Many of you have ancestors who came from Ukraine. If you know what life was like in Ukraine at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, or in the Soviet Union during the last century, you know that people had difficult lives, and many of them escaped through alcohol. The problem is that they escaped from a bad situation only to find themselves in a worse situation.

This isn't to say that we shouldn't have compassion for people who want to escape a life of drudgery, poverty, or abuse. But the young people in the video were clearly well off - no worries about food on the table or a roof over their heads here! They were driving down the street in a nice convertible, and the

biggest concern was whether to sit in the back seat or the front seat! Life is tough, eh?

Escapism. Think about it. Who wants to escape? People who are trapped. If I'm trapped, I've got to ask how, and by whom. Over my almost 25 years of pastoral ministry I've known enough young people (and not-so-young people as well!) who are into escapism to know that it's an epidemic. The fact that this video had been viewed almost 150 million times before I saw it proves that its message resonates with lots of people.

It's difficult to understand how in our society, with our high standard of living and our economic, political, and social freedom, so many people are deeply into escapism.

"Partying" isn't the only way people escape. How many millions of hours are wasted on computer games? For many gamers the fantasy worlds they inhabit and the fantasy identities they take on are more real to them than the people they study or work with. Other people escape through television or movies. Sports are another way to forget reality. And again, I'm not saying that computer games, television, movies, or sports are bad. The point is that anything can be misused, can become addictive, and can take over our life in an unhealthy way if we let it.

Some people are unbearable to live with when their hockey team loses. Others need to dress up like their favourite Star Trek character to "feel like themselves". Some individuals need to have a drink every hour or two to just get through the day. Then there's the guy who spends a hundred hours a week playing computer games, or his buddy who borrows money to gamble at the casino, or his girlfriend who is a malicious gossip. And the list goes on and on.

These types of behaviours just go to show that lots of people find their "real lives", their jobs, their education and their relationships with real human beings pretty well meaningless.

And then there's the physical danger involved. Not long ago I was talking with some parents about how different the world is for young people now. The mother of a 12 year old girl was explaining how she had to teach her daughter that if she is ever at a party she can never leave her drink unattended for fear that someone would put a drug in it and then take advantage of her.

The reality of sexual and other types of assault is scary, and more common than we might want to admit. As one of my buddies in university used to say, "everybody's not a nice guy". There are people out there - usually good looking and charming people - who don't see you as a person, just as a means of indulging their lusts. They look at you the same way a spider looks at a fly. Add alcohol and drugs, which break down people's inhibitions, and bad things can happen. It's difficult to be hit by a train when you're not standing on the tracks. It's difficult to be attacked if you're not in the company of predators.

On top of everything there's the spiritual element. Some of you are going to think that I'm crazy, or that I'm just saying this because I'm a priest and I "have to". But I think it's the most essential point of this article. Sunday Liturgy should be the most important thing we look forward to on the weekend. If it's not, we need to ask ourselves "why"? It might be a failure in our local parish, in our upbringing, or in our own spiritual constitution. It's usually a combination of all three. And in this sense it really doesn't make a difference whether I'm looking forward to the weekend so that I can party, or go to the cottage, or read a book, or whatever. If God and my faith aren't at the top of my priority list it really doesn't matter whether I'm "kickin' in the front seat" or "sittin' in the back seat", does it?

Everyone wants to be happy, but the devil is devious. He gets us to buy into a specific behaviour with a promise of happiness ("drink this, you'll feel good", "do this, you'll get a rush!"), then when we're hooked we end up needing more and more of the particular stimulant to get less and less of a high.

There are no secrets, nor shortcuts, to happiness. Happiness isn't a by-product of alcohol or adrenaline. Happiness is the result of living a good, well-ordered life: doing our best in school; respecting our parents, teachers, coaches, and elders; working hard and being honest at our jobs; following the "golden rule" - treating others as we would like them to treat us; being faithful to our friends, our families, and our spouses; knowing the difference between right and wrong, having the strength of character to do what's right even when it's not popular, and never doing what's wrong even if the whole world is doing it; having the courage to say "I'm sorry", and the grace to say "thank you".

We can escape from something, or we can escape to something. When things around us are confusing and frightening it's probably better to escape to a place which is peaceful, orderly, beautiful, and safe. This is what we should be

experiencing on Sunday morning in Church, and in our hearts every day in prayer.

Life often seems hard. The way to overcome difficulties is not to avoid them, but to go through them. School work is often hard. Avoiding it doesn't make it go away. Having healthy relationships is hard. But working through the difficulties makes our relationships stronger and more fulfilling.

Nothing which is really worthwhile in life is easy. This isn't to say that we shouldn't have good friends and enjoy spending time with them. It is to say that if we really want to be happy we need have a balanced life, enjoying our social, intellectual, physical, and spiritual activities to the max, without getting sucked in by the lure of false happiness and unhealthy, destructive, behaviours.