

# Let's get healthy together

By Bishop Paul V. Marshall, *Diocesan Life*, June 2006



Bishop Paul Marshall

***I hate seatbelts, especially as I have two bad shoulders. I nonetheless wear seatbelts because I do not have the right to become a comatose accident victim with all that this implies for my family and the drain it places on public resources. I do not believe that we have the right to maintain our bodies or minds in ways that will turn our families into unpaid health aides or cost everybody else money.***

That thought comes from the time I spent this Lent meditating through the Ten Commandments. In those meditations the prohibition, “Thou shalt not steal,” means considerably more than resisting the urge to boost small items from Walmart.

Honoring the commandment against stealing has to do with keeping our desires proportionate to the rights and needs of others.

In a book about Jewish culture, Professor Michael Wex reveals that in the days when many, if not most, European Jews were very poor, there developed the proverb, *aiyn nasher ist aiyn goneff*. It translates, a nosher (continuous snacker) is a thief.

In the land of junk food and superabundance, the word “to nosh” has been borrowed from Yiddish and made

cute, but that was not what it meant in the old country.

It is important to me to remember that originally a nosher was something like a crackhead – someone who consumes all available family resources to feed a habit.

My reflection led me to realize that one of the major ways we steal without recognizing it is by maintaining poor health. When we do not take care of our bodies we inevitably steal time, energy, and money from family, friends, and community.

I am hardly on a high horse about this. In the ten years I have been your bishop I have lost 63 pounds. Six pounds a year is nothing to brag about, as each of them came off the slow and hard way, but I am finally within normal weight and body-mass parameters, and still have more work to do.

I am coming to understand health a new way, and to understand my own personal biology and psychology.

Again, I have a long way to go before taking modeling jobs for the AARP magazine. I am not skinny and still tremble at the sight of Ben and Jerry's Cherry Garcia. I cannot change my biology or background, and as the movie says, “If you can't fix it, you gotta stand it.”

So as I write words that may be

uncomfortable to read, I do indeed recognize that changing life habits is a daily struggle, and one that we (or I) do not always win.

I cannot tell anybody how they should make the changes in their habit and outlook that good self-care requires. I can say that I have come to believe that the effort is not optional, and insofar as stealing resources is involved, it is a moral question.

There are no easy answers. Controlling appetites for food, possessions, power, and all the rest is a complicated business, hardly ever just a matter of will power, although it is never less than a matter of will power (not eating the first Oreo™ is a decision). Childhood patterns, biology, and various traumas play a part in what people sense themselves to want.

People who admit this about their lives understand St. Paul's frequent reflections on the struggle between what we intend and what we do, what our “spirit” wants and what our “flesh” seeks.

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# Let's get healthy together

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Long before St. Augustine and even longer before Freud, the New Testament faced the fact that our life is full of conflict, and that we are in the habit – I use the word deliberately – of soothing and reassuring ourselves with temporary feelings and experiences that can in the end destroy us. St. Paul insists that relationship with God is the answer.

The good news is that if we eat, drink, shop, bully or do other destructive things when we are upset or worried, there is an alternative. I am quite serious about this: learning to meditate and to pray contemplatively opens the door to a soothing and strengthening experience that no sugar rush can provide.

June is the month when we celebrate Pentecost this year: to that part of each of us that reaches for what is less than God to soothe our anxieties or fill our need for love and security there comes a promise. Jesus promises the comfort and strength of the Holy Spirit to all his disciples. We are invited to appropriate that gift on a daily, even hourly, basis.

Perhaps it is the economic depression that haunts so much of our state. For whatever reason it is a spiritual issue that Pennsylvania is, depending on what you read, either the second or third most obese state in the country.

Combined with our high smoking and drinking rates, we are hurting ourselves

and keeping health costs high. But we are also stealing, and that deserves some thought.

The alternative comfort God's Spirit offers deserves even more thought, and disciplined action. People's lives have different patterns and this may not be the time for you to take action, but if it is, let's get healthy together.

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