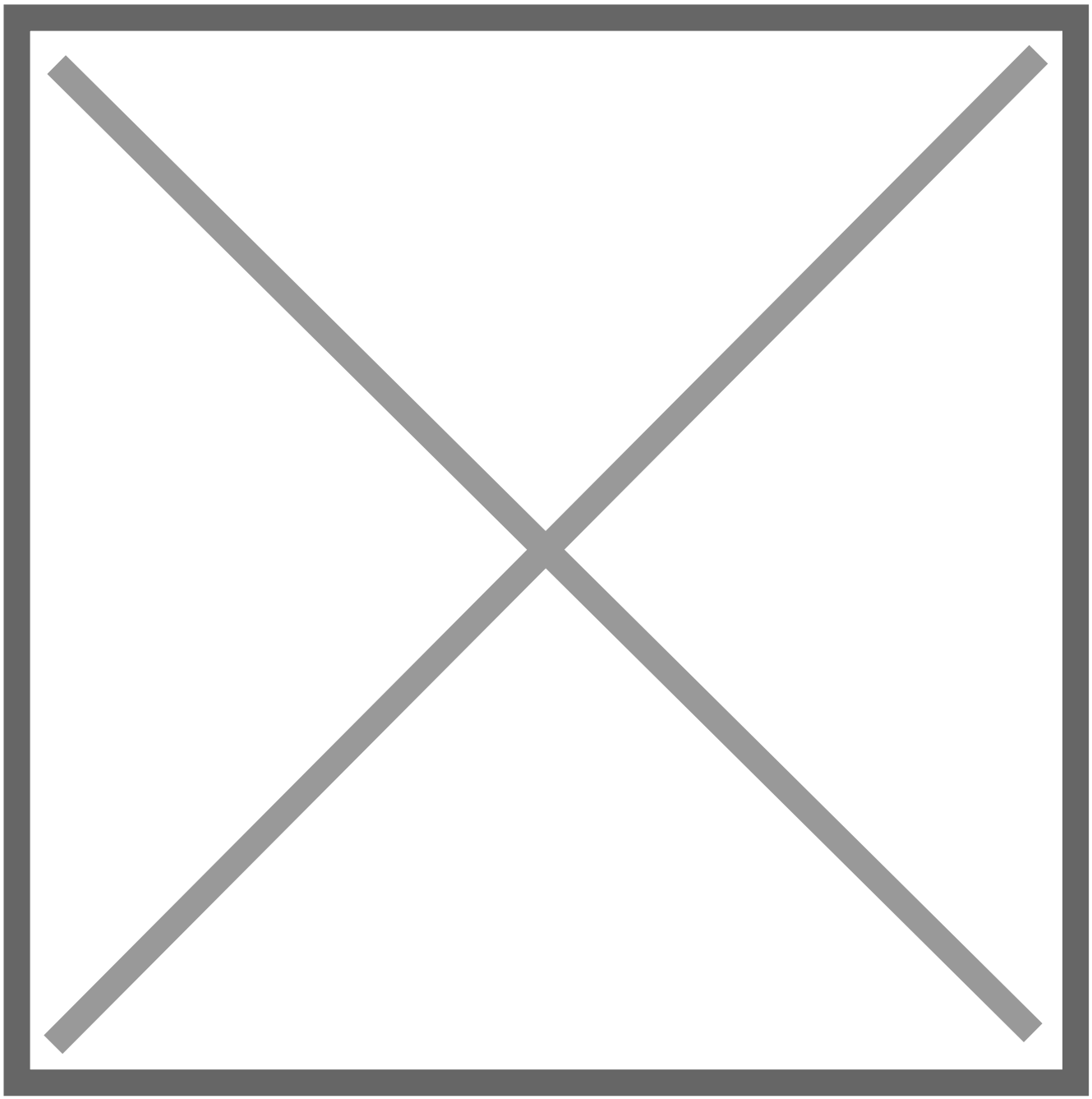
News



Bishop Michael Burbidge of Arlington, Va., delivers the homily during the opening Mass of the National Prayer Vigil for Life Jan. 18, 2024, at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington. (OSV News/Catholic Standard/Mihoko Owada)

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A U.S. bishop is highlighting the nation's growing mental health crisis, while pointing to the "divine medicine" offered by Christ through the work of the Church.

On Jan. 19, Bishop Michael Burbidge of Arlington, Virginia, released "The Divine Physician and a Christian Approach to Mental Health and Wellbeing," a pastoral letter surveying the state of mental health in the U.S. and offering both "encouragement and guidance" in addressing mental health challenges "in light of the teachings of Christ and the Gospel."

Burbidge said the letter was prompted by his "increasing pastoral concern" over "the emergence of a broad crisis concerning mental health that is negatively impacting Americans, and especially young people, in terms of their spiritual, mental, emotional and physical wellbeing."

He described "the scale and scope of this crisis" as "staggering," citing data from the National Alliance on Mental Illness indicating that one in five American adults experience mental health challenges each year.

The pastoral letter, available on the Diocese of Arlington's website, also announced the creation of a diocesan mental health council to provide resources for "those experiencing significant mental health challenges as well as their loved ones."

Burbidge said the council also is "committed to providing training opportunities for mental health counselors" so that they can better ground their services "in a Catholic anthropology that emphasizes the sacredness of all human life and the dignity of every person."

Central to the bishop's pastoral letter was an understanding of the human person as a divinely created being redeemed by Christ.

Burbidge situated the issue of mental health within the broader context of God's eternal plan for humanity, and the "negative effects of our separation" from God, which "so obviously frustrate our natural desires for health, wellbeing and lasting happiness."

"Even before the advent of Christ, and before our definitive knowledge of God's goodness and the possibility of heavenly peace, humanity knew that all was not well," he said. "We knew that we needed a Savior."

The numerous healings Christ performed in his earthly ministry, "revealing his authority over ailments affecting mind, body and soul," point to his intention to ultimately redeem humanity fully from the effects of sin and death, said Burbidge.

The bishop stressed that "the Church follows our Lord in emphasizing the primacy of spiritual healing, the importance of faith in God, and fidelity to his commands as the key for everlasting salvation."

He said that "faith and trust in God are shown to be the keys to everlasting health and wellbeing for humanity," while emphasizing that "we must be careful in recognizing that not all who ask for healing are healed, either in the way they want or in the timeframe for which they may hope."

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In his letter, Burbidge explored the issue of mental health with respect to several considerations: the ongoing stigma many feel in seeking help; the mystery of human suffering, which can be redemptive when united with that of Christ; and the social realities that have led to increased loneliness and disconnection.

He particularly mourned "the breakdown of the family," a decline in which "many of the challenges we experience today have their roots." BBurbidge said that the erosion of the family structure — in which children "first discover their inherent dignity" — has been "accelerated over the past century by the progressive disintegration of sacramental marriage as a cultural and social norm."

The Church has been entrusted with a mission to bring Christ's healing to all of these wounds, said Burbidge.

Christians "have a particular responsibility to address the stigmas that prevent people from seeking help and to remove barriers that keep so many stuck in patterns of isolation and misery," he said.

Less than half of Americans experiencing mental health issues seek treatment, with those who do often waiting years to enter into counseling, he noted.

At the same time, Burbidge cautioned against equating the world's view of human identity, health and happiness with that of the divine.

"The difference between Catholic and secular views of happiness and mental health is the difference between a 'freedom for' versus a 'freedom from' mentality," he explained.

The secular "freedom from" mentality seeks to eliminate anxiety and distress, he said, while the Christian understanding "goes deeper," and "encourages us to recognize freedom as a gift meant for our holistic flourishing."

"The Christian approach guides us to consider what God asks of us in our lives," said Burbidge.

He also distinguished between suffering and despair.

"As Catholics, we understand that suffering, whether physical or mental, is an invitation to draw near to Christ at the foot of the cross," said Burbidge. "We can find purpose and meaning in suffering if we first recognize that everyone suffers to different degrees and that peace is possible when suffering is offered to God with confidence and earnest prayer."

In contrast, despair "lacks that other-focused quality," and leads to isolation and self-focus while obscuring "any larger meaning and purpose," he said.

"God may allow suffering in our lives, but he forbids despair," said Burbidge. "Any person experiencing recurrent or unrelenting despair should seek assistance and support."

He urged the faithful to be "willing to connect with others," since "we are made for community and find purpose when given the chance to cultivate authentic relationships with others and practice virtues like compassion."

In addition, he said, "due to the structure of our society, we must be more intentional than ever about our daily priorities, especially including our prioritization of relationship with friends and family."

The bishop observed that "all things that are devotional and holy" also benefit the human psyche, "including the sacrament of reconciliation on a regular basis."

He called for Christian counseling that is "rightly anchored in a Christian theological anthropology," and that "restores and equips us for our daily pilgrimage."

"Counseling involves sharing our mind and heart with another in the hope of being restored to health and wellbeing in body, mind and soul," said Burbidge, adding that "a counselor with a Christian theological anthropology — that is, the understanding of our origin and ultimate destiny in God — is better equipped to help us overcome the obstacles that prevent us from being fully able to follow God's call in our lives."

Counseling is intended "neither to eliminate all hardships nor to establish a perpetual dependency on therapy," he said, but "should help us accept and embrace challenges in our lives with the confidence that comes from a preeminent relationship with God and the healing offered through relationship with his Son, the Divine Physician."

Quoting Isaiah 43:1, Burbidge invited the faithful to "reflect without ceasing on God's promise that 'You are mine.'"

"May we pray with humility and trust, seeking whenever necessary the assistance of professional experts who are Christ's instruments for our healing. May we actively engage with the sacramental life of the Church and support one another in our parish communities," he said. "And may we find consolation and peace in the frequent reception of the Eucharist and the adoration of the one who promises to save us, forever and always."