

Coffee and the gift of life

By Father Joseph Breighner

A priest friend of mine went through three weeks of migraine headaches when he withdrew from caffeine. He said that he stopped drinking coffee because he didn't want to be so dependent on any drug. I have bad news for him, and good news for the rest of us.

What do you think that a 14-year study of 402,260 adults, aged 55 to 71, -a study which began in 1995 - has concluded as a way to live longer longer? Yes, you guessed it. Drink coffee! No, I don't own stock in coffee, nor do I encourage anyone who doesn't drink coffee to start drinking coffee. Healthy non-drinkers do live slightly longer than healthy drinkers. However, as Jane E. Brody noted in her Personal Health column in the New York Times, June 26 : "But when the researchers took into account other health-related characteristics among the participants, like smoking, alcohol use, meat consumption, physical activity and body mass index, those who regularly drank coffee lived longer."

Here's more good news: "Coffee drinkers who were relatively healthy when the study began were less likely than non-drinkers to die of heart disease, respiratory disease, stroke, diabetes, infections, injuries and accidents."

Brody continued: "The risk of death gradually dropped as the number of cups that participants drank increased to four or five. At six cups or more each day, there was a slight rise in death risk, compared with that at four or five cups. But the chances of death remained lower than among people who drank no coffee."

Yes, there were a few cautions in the 14-year study published in the New England Journal of Medicine and by AARP. A "cup" is measured as eight to 10 ounces, not the giant drinks sold so often in stores. And, yes, some coffee does have higher levels of caffeine than other coffee. And, also, coffee brewed with filters (which included Keurig) is much safer.

Finally, the study notes that caffeine is a drug and it does react with other drugs. Check with your doctor about this.

While you clearly want to check with your doctor about interactions with any medication you are taking, the benefits of drinking coffee seem remarkable. In addition to all the benefits I've already noted, there is this additional paragraph: "Even though coffee can cause a temporary rise in blood pressure, the new study, like those before it, found the risk of heart disease to be lower among otherwise healthy coffee drinkers. Other benefits suggested by recent studies include a reduced risk of Type 2 diabetes, liver disease and Parkinson's disease. Some research has found a reduced risk of depression, dementia and Alzheimers disease among coffee drinkers."

Why have I taken the time to share all of this? Two reasons. First, I did feel a moral obligation to talk about research that seems to contradict so many of the previous studies which seemed to note only harmful effects for drinking caffeinated coffee. It's nice to know that both caffeinated and decaffeinated coffee have multiple benefits. I always feel better when, what I once thought was a weakness (my inability to give up caffeine), turns out to be a virtue! I like easy virtues for a change.

On a more profound level, however, I note this study because it reflects a deep respect for life. As someone wisely said: "We need to see life as a privilege." Life is pure gift. God didn't have to create any of us! God didn't owe life to us. But since God is love, God chose to share life with all of us. St. Paul said so beautifully: "Owe no debt to anyone except the debt to love one another."

Our yearning for a few extra days or years of life reflect our yearning for eternal life. And eternity begins now when we choose to be, and to send, love to all the events and people in our lives.

Allow me to close with a quote from a birthday card I received way back in March. The card was printed by the Servants of Mary: "Each day is a gift, an opportunity, a treasure, because God is the One who gives us the breath of life, places before us a purpose and direction, allows us to enjoy the wonder of His presence, and the fellowship of His love."

