

Addictions — One Catholic Response

By Msgr. Kieran Martin

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Adapted from a keynote address by Monsignor Martin at the 1987 annual symposium of the National Catholic Council on Alcoholism.

There seems to be such a great deal of talk, articles, TV programming, newspaper and TV advertising about alcohol and other drug addiction in the past few years that one might get the impression that this problem is on the way to solution. Any of us who are involved in treatment for addiction or any of us who are in parish ministry — well . . . we know that isn't true. We know that it is a human problem and will always be with us. It has, to use a somewhat overused expression, come out of the closet and very much into the open during the past decade.

Many celebrities have gone “public” with their addiction to alcohol and other drugs. At one time the average public library had a small section on alcoholism; now many books will be found there. When a bibliography is included, in books on addiction today, it is usually extensive and the list of books on this subject continues to grow. Articles in periodicals treating the subject of alcoholism among the clergy have proliferated during the past several years.

I recall two young women coming to see me at my rectory about five years ago for information for term papers they were writing concerning alcoholism among the clergy. They were from two different colleges and came independently of one another a few months apart. These interviews convinced me that addiction was very much in the public eye and addiction among the clergy continues to fascinate people.

In spite of the apparent recognition by the public that substance abuse means great danger, pain, and heart-ache for the individual, the family, and the community; in spite of all the publicity given by the media to drug abuse by some superstars of the world of sports —the problem seems to have increased. More people than ever seem to be addicted. The classic “junkie” hooked on heroin seems to have been pushed aside by the yuppie hooked on cocaine. Wall Street brokers may have been heavy drinkers at one time but now they seem to seek highs other than on the big board.

I was born during Prohibition and I recall my father — God rest him — saying that his recollection was that there was less drinking in the days before Prohibition than during it. The forbidden fruit syndrome. That was his feeling then; I have a similar feeling now. I feel that there is more drinking now than there was during the early '50s when I was a young priest. My recollection may be very faulty, you may have similar feelings or just the opposite. I don't think it matters except to the social historian. What matters is the problem itself, whatever its proportions when contrasted to another age. The problem is with us, it is with us constantly, and it is with us monumentally.

A "drug-free generation"

There was a great deal of attention thrown on this problem (in October 1986) when the President signed new anti-drug legislation. It was, as they say, a media event. The President said as he signed the bill: “Our goal in this crusade is nothing less than a drug-free generation. The vaccine that will end the epidemic is a combination of tough laws and a dramatic change in public attitude.” Our Executive Director, Father John O'Neill, represented our Episcopal Moderator, Archbishop Edward O'Meara, at the bill signing ceremony.

Passage of this bill received mixed reactions. According to Alcoholism Magazine these reactions range from disappointment that the bill did not provide warning labels on the bottles, to a sense of victory with the inclusion of alcohol-related problems along with the problems associated with other drugs. The legislation calls for a great deal of enforcement of the laws which the legislators feel will end the problem. The legislative mental-

ity frequently believes that laws really do solve problems, but a legislative body can legislate itself blue in the face and no problems will be solved. Maybe the problem will be brought into sharper focus by legislation; perhaps the problem will be somewhat restricted because of penalties imposed, but no problem is solved. The Ten Commandments never stopped anyone from committing sin.

They stressed, to the Senate, that education, prevention, treatment, and research should receive at least equal attention as law enforcement.

According to Alcoholism Magazine, a number of national constituency groups were involved in the writing of this bill. These groups included The National Council on Alcoholism which played a major role in working out the final version. They stressed, to the Senate, that education, prevention, treatment, and research should receive at least equal attention as law enforcement. The efforts of the National Council on Alcoholism focused on raising the awareness of the United States Senate that alcohol is by far the number one drug problem and that alcohol is frequently used in combination with other drugs. I hope they succeeded — with the Senate I mean. The late Will Rogers once said that you didn't have to hit a senator over the head with a two by four to get his attention. He claimed that, one day at the beginning of the Prohibition years, one of the senators fell in the Senate cloakroom and cut himself

badly when he broke a bottle in his hip pocket. Will Rogers said the Senate immediately passed a bill to carpet the cloakroom to cut down on the breakage.

The press reported, shortly after the signing ceremony, that Monsignor O'Brien of Daytop Village was unhappy with the President's program and the media has indicated that Mrs. Reagan has reacted somewhat adversely to his criticism. But we must remember that the President and Mrs. Reagan do not see the problem from the point of view of Monsignor O'Brien. Monsignor O'Brien is critical of the federal program probably because Monsignor is involved in the treatment of the drug abuser, he is not involved in law enforcement.

While a number of people, like Monsignor O'Brien, were not satisfied with the final bill, Michael Q. Ford, executive director of the National Association of Alcohol Treatment Programs, was pleased with the final version. He was quoted, at the time of the signing, as saying: "I can't help but be delighted to have such a large, important bill with the kind of focus it has. We've worked toward that for a long time. Fortunately, the original emphasis on heroin and cocaine was widened to include a broad range of chemical dependency." I think Alcoholism Magazine may have sounded a note of caution, which we should make note of, when it said: ". . . because of the magnitude of the new law, it's much too early to figure out all of the ramifications."

I have no right and I hope that I have not given you the impression that I am suggesting bad faith on the part of Congress or the Executive Branch. They meant well and I am certain that the legislation will do some good. What is more important is that, behind the scenes, on a lower level of the Executive Branch, there are people who see this problem very clearly and who can, in time, have a strong influence on others who will, hopefully, turn the attack around and put the emphasis on treatment and education.

A few weeks after the bill signing ceremony, our Episcopal Moderator and our Executive Director were both invited to the White House to a working luncheon, attended by several people from the White House staff who are advisors to the President on substance abuse. People like this, who understand this problem for what it really is and who have even a limited access to the President, will have, in my opinion, a real influence on the solution to this problem. When I use the word "solution," I do not mean that we could do away with addiction any more than we could do away with human nature, but I mean that while the problem will continue to exist, at least there will be a lessening of it from the present epidemic proportions.

It may fall to priests to help

And the proportions are epidemic. That we have to accept as a given. The youngsters in my parish are drinking beer at a very early age — and see nothing wrong with it. Their parents, obviously, see nothing wrong with it. I am not talking about having a sip of champagne at a special family occasion. I am talking about youngsters walking the streets of my island parish at 3:15 in the afternoon, on a weekday, drinking a bottle of beer

— as if it were a bottle of soda. I am not talking about 18 year olds — I am talking about 12 and 13 year old children — babies. From many points of view, that's all they are: babies. It may well be, as Monsignor O'Brien of Daytop claims, that drug abuse among the young is caused primarily by emotional abandonment by their families and the failure of parents to guide them in the maturation process. If that be true, and I believe that it well may be, then it falls on priests like myself, who are in parish ministry, to do something about the failure of parents in this area.

We might ask at this point: what have we as Church been doing these past few years about this problem?

There is, I believe, a natural reactionary response from people like ourselves, in organizations like NCCA, to say that the Church is not doing very much about this epidemic of addiction. We tend to be very impatient with our bishops who seem, to us, to have put the proposed pastoral letter on substance abuse on a back burner on the rather large stove surface they work with. Our sense of priority is not theirs, and I for one, when in a sarcastic mood, tend to become impatient that they have wasted their time on an unimportant topic like the economy when the problem of substance abuse is ready to destroy us! I know that is unreasonable — but isn't it a typical alcoholic reaction to a situation over which I have so little control?

I may feel that our episcopal leaders should have the bit of substance abuse in their teeth and be running away with it, but in many situations in life, the direction to a solution comes, not from the top but from the bottom — from the grass roots, so to speak. I don't speak for it, of course, but I think it is evident that Alcoholics Anonymous wasn't imposed from above — nor did it come from legislation — or from government funding — or from erudite papers and studies. No, it came from two drunks who met and realized that they could support one another's desire to stop drinking.

I believe that one capital "C" Catholic answer comes not from the top — from our bishops, primarily, but from the bottom. No bishop was the prime mover of this work among priests. No, but a once addicted, now recovered priest, reached out to help his fellow priests who were suffering from the same disease from which he recovered. From that reaching out, a whole movement began in a particular place and gradually spread from that place to other places. That's the way it began in the Diocese of Brooklyn and I suspect that is the way it began all across our country. The present Bishop of Pittsburgh, Anthony J. Bevilacqua, had been the chancellor of the Diocese of Brooklyn and as chancellor he was a member of the Bishop's Committee on Alcoholism. When he became the Bishop of Pittsburgh, he organized a committee based very much on the Brooklyn model in that diocese. Who knows where it might spread from there?

National potential

Before the establishment of the NCCA there were individual priests, all across our nation, who did their work, helping their fellow alcoholic priests to sobriety, often with their bishop's approval, sometimes with only tacit approval or, at least, no active opposition. When Father Ralph Pfau organized the NCCA, he set up the framework so that this work could be coordinated across diocesan lines on a national level. Although this coordination does take place in a limited way, the NCCA has the potential and capability of truly being a national organization, in fact as well as in name.

In the Diocese of Brooklyn we had a wonderful priest by the name of Frank Kelly, God be good to him. He was one of Ralph Pfau's early associates in the NCCA. At one time in his career, Frank Kelly was assigned as a curate, as they were called then, to my home parish in Brooklyn and I often served his Mass as an altar boy. In those days he was sometimes the worse for wear on the altar. I was in the minor seminary at the time and extremely loyal to the priesthood. One day Frank was in such bad shape that at one point during Mass I had to get a chair so he could sit down for a few moments. After Mass, one of the daily Mass biddies came to me outside the church and asked me what was wrong with Father Kelly. Of course, I'm sure she knew what the problem was, but she wasn't going to get my opinion — ever! So I told her I thought he had a heart attack! Sometime after that assignment, he found sobriety. He realized that his life, his priesthood had been restored to him and in gratitude he wanted to share his rediscovered life by working to help other suffering alcoholics,

particularly priests, find their lives again, in sobriety.

As a young priest I sent several of my parishioners to him for help with their drinking problems. Frank did his number on them, steered them to the Fellowship and let AA take it from there. His reputation in the New York area became such that at one time the Protestant Episcopal Diocese of New York requested him to take care of one of their well known priests. Frank was not successful working with this man, and I am sure it was a great sadness for him that this unhappy Episcopalian priest could not share his own vision of sobriety.

Frank Kelly surrounded himself with priests he had helped to sobriety and eventually a little group was formed. These priests began to work with priests of the diocese who were drinking alcoholically. They had the bishop's approval for their work although it was not publicly announced as one of the official diocesan programs. That was the beginning of what has become "The Bishop's Committee on Alcoholism" which is what the Health Panel of the Diocese of Brooklyn is called. When it was reorganized in 1976, we requested that it be called "The Bishop's Committee" so that it would be clear to all that it had the bishop's full backing and approval and that it was an official agency of the diocese. This was important but it was only possible because alcoholism had come out of the darkness into broad daylight. When the American Medical Society recognized it as a disease in 1956, that decision did much to bring the study of alcoholism and the treatment of alcoholics to respectability for the want of a better word.

Little beginnings

I did not tell you the story of the Brooklyn Committee to toot my own or my diocese's horn. I am sure that priests from all parts of our country could tell similar stories. Many diocese have health panels — some better than others. I'll be willing to wager that the best of them — and I realize that it is difficult if not impossible to measure these things — the best of them began from little beginnings at the grassroots.

There is a danger that those of us in the field of alcoholism — and I put myself there, although I am not a professional — may tend to be excessively critical of the Church for what we see as foot dragging by our bishops on this question of substance abuse. We see how important this work is; we see how many lives are being destroyed by substance abuse; we know how many lives can be restored by good programs — and so we lash out in understandable frustration.

But, my dear friends and colleagues, hasn't it always worked from the ground up? Why should we expect that somehow, this time and in this case, it will work differently? Most of us have a pragmatic streak in us and we very often become enthusiastic about a program or a subject when we see from personal experience that it works and works to our advantage. The industrial approach to intervention has had success in those firms where management, for various reasons, mostly economic, realized that it was to the company's advantage, to rehabilitate the alcoholic, not fire him or her. Most of the people who are at the top management positions in firms where alcoholism programs are working well are practical people who may have, at first, instituted and supported these programs because they saw that the firm could save money but ultimately they realize that what they are saving is lives. In my limited experience, the several bishops I know are all intelligent and practical men who also recognize a good program when they see one. As bishops see programs in their dioceses working and priests, sisters, and brothers restored to active ministry, they will become enthusiasts about treatment and education. Ultimately, I believe we will see not only a pastoral letter on substance abuse but many successful programs on the local level which will help, not only our priests, religious sisters, and brothers but our sisters and brothers in the laity as well.

Our Episcopal Moderator has told us that the question of a pastoral on substance abuse is on the table of the committee under the chairmanship of Cardinal Law. I am sure it will be published. ("New Slavery, New Freedom: A Pastoral Message on Substance Abuse" was issued in November 1990. — ed.)

I think we've come a long, long way since NCCA was founded almost 40 years ago. To give you one example of how a change came about in attitude, and in actuality, I would like to tell you about a retreat house called

Padua House which was established in Philadelphia in 1949 as a rehabilitation facility but which, for the first three years of its existence, was nothing more than a clerical jail. Let me quote the words of the priest who was finally put in charge of Padua House, Father Vath, who described it in the following words: "For the first three years it was no more than a clerical prison. The priests were put there and that was it. There was no rehabilitation program. Every priest was suspended. They were not permitted to celebrate even a private Mass. The Lord knows what they did. I don't. I was not there then. There was no program whatever." That was 1949 to 1951. From my point of view, it isn't a long time ago at all. We've come a long way from there.

Parishes and schools

What is happening to face this problem in the parishes? What is happening in the schools? These are two areas of "church," two places where the people of God attempt to live the Gospel message. What is the Church doing in these places? Some of us are aware of the work which Father Edward Dunne, a member of our Board of Directors, is doing in the Diocese of Brooklyn with his parish education program: preaching at all the weekend Masses and having two evening education sessions during the following week. Father John Fulford, another Redemptorist, has a similar program in the mid West. Father John Murray, another Board member, has instituted a program in his parish school of substance abuse education. In his last assignment, he gave the same course in the parish high school.

At our last two symposia we heard the story of Sister Terese Del Genio and the intervention team she established at the parish at which she works in Calumet City, Illinois. Sister tells a powerful story where help for the alcoholic parishioner comes from a team of fellow parishioners who intervene at the request of the family and confront the alcoholic to bring him or her to the awareness of what this disease is doing to them as well as the other family members. They arrange detox and rehabilitation. In other words, it is a completely professional operation from start to finish. There may be similar programs here and there across our nation, but it is very difficult to come by such information. The best clearing house for it would be NCCA, but sometimes the very existence of NCCA comes as a surprise to people. I recall a few years ago getting a call from someone who was on a diocesan health panel. He was attempting to contact all the health panels he could so that information could be shared. I told him about NCCA and now that group is a part of our organization. I hope we can learn at least as much from them as they can from us.

I am aware of a group of people in Queens County, New York City, who established a program called "Chem Free." The principal of one of the schools, which eventually set up this program, had a woman in the parish who was a C.A.C. and who pointed out to her that the explanation of why some of the children were having real problems in school, with their school work and difficulties in getting along with their peers, might be explained by the presence of alcoholism in the homes of these children. When the principal investigated a few of these cases, she found it to be true, that alcoholism was present in the home and when the problem was confronted from that point of view, the child's behavior and school work improved to a great degree. Sister was so convinced of the wisdom of this approach that she talked the pastor into sending her to the Johnston Institute for training during the following summer. Sister returned and shared her experience with the other principals in the area and the program called "Chem Free" was born. I am sure that there are other examples of things like this happening across our nation in our Catholic schools.

Some children were having real problems in school because of alcoholism in their homes.

At Our Lady of Victory parish in Brooklyn, Msgr. Joseph Nugent operated a shelter for homeless and alcoholic men, named "Our Father's House" since 1974. It closed on last Good Friday when the last of 1,400 men passed through its program. Msgr. Nugent is a C.A.C., a member of NCCA who made a presentation at our Symposium in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, a few years ago. The reason for the closing is due to the fact that the City of New York, during the past few years, has opened many shelters for the homeless and two of them, with 1,500 beds, are within walking distance of the program in Our Lady of Victory. Many of the homeless chose them instead of Our Father's House which had very strict rules. Those addicted to alcohol and other drugs were required to remain in the home for 90 days during which time they were forced to change their habits. All the men were required to find jobs and save money. Their lives were without order, and Our Father's House

put order and discipline back into their lives. Monsignor does not know what will rise from the ashes of this wonderful program but he says: "The Church should be doing what others are not. In 1974, there was no one to house the homeless. Now everybody's doing it. It's time for us to leave that and move on." I use this as an example of one program I know about in my own diocese. I am certain that other such programs exist elsewhere across our nation. Where they exist, that's where the Church is doing something to address this problem.

More examples

Those of us who have been associated with the NCCA should be aware of the fact that we honored Bishop Povish of the Diocese of Lansing, at our symposium held two years ago in San Francisco, for the excellent program he instituted in his diocese. This wonderful program set up committees in each parish which act as resources to help the parishioners deal with alcoholism in themselves or their families. Bishop Povish in accepting the award acknowledged that the program really was the brain child of others. Of course NCCA was aware of this but he was honored for his foresight and wisdom in, not only giving his own support to the concept but applying the resources of the diocese to it.

There is another example, on another level, of the Church's expanding involvement in this work. The Tablet, which is the newspaper of the Brooklyn diocese, published a little booklet several years ago called "The Glass Cage." This booklet is a reprint of an excellent series of articles which The Tablet published on alcoholism in 1979. There was such an interested and enthusiastic response to the series that they decided to put the articles in booklet form and I know, from personal experience, that it has helped many individuals and families get help for themselves or family members. The articles were originally written by one of the reporters, who was not an alcoholic, but who saw the great damage being done to individuals and families and decided to look into the matter and see just what he could do about it. His concern and work is still doing a lot of good. This is only one little effort by one agency of one diocese. So things are being done and, I'm sure, will continue to be done.

Another example of how the message is spread and the work expands is also one from my own experience. The Bishop's Committee on Alcoholism of the Brooklyn Diocese is listed in our diocesan directory as an agency of the diocese and our phone number is also listed in the white pages of the telephone directory. As a result, I get frequent calls from people seeking help. Although the Committee's work is restricted to our priests, I can be a source of information for anyone in the diocese who calls. Although, at the present time, my diocese does not have an extensive program which reaches out to all the people of the diocese, we are able to help in a limited way. At least we can give them the information about other programs which may be able to help them directly. I am aware of several parishes in my diocese which have so-called "hot-lines" for people seeking help for an addiction problem. So the church is becoming more and more involved in this work on almost every level.

Last year in the keynote address, Sister Maurice Doody, the Board of Directors' worthy chairperson, requested a pastoral on addiction from the bishops of our country. I know that request has been heard and in time, as I have indicated during this keynote, I am certain that we will see such a pastoral. In the meantime, while we are waiting for our bishops to lift this work to the national level and unify us in our approach to addiction, we need to continue what we have been doing on the local level.

There is a monstrous disease out there.

As you know the theme of our symposium is "Addiction, a catholic — small c — disease." In this talk I was supposed to give "One Catholic — capital C — Response." I hope I have given several responses to this problem by pointing out some of the things which the Catholic Church is doing in this area. We are operating mainly on a local level at the present time, with our own organization, the NCCA, on the national level where it has been and will continue to be a national voice. If the NCCA is not officially the voice of the Roman Catholic Church in these matters, at least it is a voice of a group of Church people, clergy and lay, who have a vital interest in its mission. I think the work is expanding, on this local level. I hope — prayerfully hope — that the Catholic Church, through its bishops, will move this work to the national level with some speed and dispatch. There is a monstrous disease out there, and it has to be stopped or it will destroy us all.