

THE BISHOP AND ALCOHOLISM IN THE PRIESTHOOD

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Monsignori, Fathers and members of the laity, I want to apologize, first, for the delay in getting to this meeting. I had planned to be here earlier in the afternoon, but certain matters detained me at a meeting and got me here just about half an hour late. You will understand, I am sure, that there are a great many problems in the Church today, and constant communication among the Bishops is necessary, and meetings are necessary, particularly in the United States, for updating of our thinking, of our approaches to the modern problems which we face together. And certainly all Bishops, particularly the American Bishops, have a great understanding and great insight into the lives and problems of their priests.

The Second Vatican Council tells us, and we very humbly voted, that we are the shepherds, the fathers and the brothers of the priests and the laity. And I think as we face any problem in our time, it is under these aspects that Bishops look forward to the solution. A Bishop is no longer just looking for the juridical solutions, the legal solutions that are ready-made in the law of the Church. In fact, you know, I am sure, that it is one of the most heartbreaking experiences of a Bishop to have to use legal and juridical means to attain ends, particularly in the realm of penalties.

In your Conference here, it is customary that you have a Bishop address you on a very particular subject, a subject in which you all are most interested, "The Bishop and Alcoholism in the Priesthood."

My assumption is that all of you here present have taken broad strides and made use of all the means that are available to you towards sobriety and rehabilitation, that you have encouraged your brother priests wherever they are across the country who have similar problems to take the elementary steps that are necessary to achieve the fulfillment of their personality in sobriety.

From the outset, then, we are thinking together, our thoughts create a bond of unity between you and me, and in my position, I am a symbol to you of the episcopate.

I have no special formula in my diocese, or in any of the work that I have done in the past for working out all of the problems of alcoholism in the priesthood.

A Medical Problem

You know that today we are very much conscious of good health. In fact, the government is stepping into the health area very intimately, so much so, that those who smoke are told every time they pick up a pack of cigarettes that cigarettes may be hazardous to one's health. Perhaps we will come to a day when the government will say likewise of alcoholic beverages, that sometimes these beverages, scotch, bourbon, gin, whatever they may be, may be hazardous to one's health. Alcoholism is a medical problem. And there are men who spend their lives in medical research trying to come up with the practical reasonable physical and medical cures for those who suffer from alcoholism.

Warnings, as you know, are not sufficient. Warnings are only signs that tell us about other men's experiences. We, in our own experiences, know the limitations of our whole personality, our limitations as we approach the temporal order, as we approach the world, and the created things in it. In our spiritual training in the Seminary, we lived a structured life of discipline that would preserve a certain spiritual foundation and motivation for all our future work. It is God who has given us the gift of a vocation to the holy priesthood.

Human effort, and human means and human experiences are the tools that we use day by day wherever we are and in whatever apostolate we may be, whether it be the pastoral apostolate or social work, or whether it be in some particular apostolate of modern society — we use also the gifts that God has given us. You, in this meeting, are using the grace that God has given you, the individual experience, the corporate experience which you have had, to bring about a better priest in yourself and a better ideal of the priesthood among others.

There is no doubt that alcoholism has caused great evil in the priesthood. It has been exaggerated, however. It is not a pessimistic view that Bishops usually have of this problem. For we know that those who have difficulties, and those who have gone through the whole gamut of living in psychological isolation and in spiritual isolation from their fellowmen and from their fellow priests and many times from their Bishop realize that there is always hope, and this hope is based on our union with Christ, the Priest.

First of all, as Christians we have hope; as priests we have greater hope, and as priests who have lived in the ministry, we can point to examples, we can point to individuals, we can point to circumstances that would give any one hope who is suffering such a trial as being an alcoholic.

The stark fact is that one created thing, alcohol, has been injurious to the physical, mental, and spiritual health of lay people and of priests in larger numbers than we can assist day by day in our personal relationships.

It was my hope when I became a Bishop that I would be able to spend much time in the rehabilitation of those priests who unfortunately for some reason or some cause or another became victims of alcoholism. But we know that this is an impossible task for a Bishop to do by himself, and this is an unfortunate thing; we must delegate this responsibility of rehabilitation to others. And the image of the Bishop many times is one which an alcoholic doesn't seem to care for. But truly I can say that those men who have come to me for help are constantly in my thoughts and prayers, and constantly in my mind. And I rejoice in those dozens of priests that I know personally who have come to a point of full service again in the Church.

The Bishop Must Act

I am sure that most Bishops think as I do, that when a problem of this kind confronts them, they must do something about it. If there is general knowledge of the particular case, if there is scandal, there must be some action taken in order not to harm the image of the priesthood among the laity, particularly among parishioners; some priests are then given temporary leaves of absence. They are sent to houses of rehabilitation; they are sent to a priestly environment; they are sent to hospitals; they are sent to psychiatric wards, in order to bring about the renewal of that physical, mental, and spiritual health that is demanded of a priest in the exercise of Holy Orders.

As you know, in viewing the life of a young man who has a vocation or who is a candidate for the priesthood, we have a serious responsibility to see that he is a man of good health; that he is a man who has normal physical and mental health. We sometimes look back and say, there is a long history of this defect in a family, or a long history of this in the personal experience of the individual, and perhaps in some instances there has been too much leniency in imposing hands on those who have such weaknesses.

On the other hand, our Lord did not ask the perfect man to be a candidate for the priesthood. He gives vocations to the weak and to the strong. He gives vocations to those who can bring the full fruition of holiness permanently and constantly to their lives, and there are others who have their ups and their downs.

There is wonderful hope today through the scientific progress which has been made in the area of alcoholism. The secular world is very conscious of this, and it seems the more progress that we make in some areas of life, the more need there is for assistance. However, this is not a point of discouragement. You have discussed over the years in your Conferences all the factors relating to alcoholism. This meeting is a renewal of getting stronger motivation for tomorrow and the next day, for this week and next week, for this month and next month; you will sustain yourselves as responsible persons who are able to face the temptations that confront you, which confront all of us. And it is only by the grace of God that more have not had to experience this problem.

In your Conferences you take up the question when is a priest an alcoholic. I don't know that anyone can determine the embryonic signs of alcoholism. Some talk begins among clergy in the diocese. You hear talk that Father X is drinking too much. There are incidents that are brought to the attention of his pastor or his fellow priest. Sometimes there are involvements with the civil law; there are peculiarities that are gossiped about, and no one really comes to a point of accusing or establishing or centering the full scientific data together in a computer-like fashion to determine that when you get all these factors and all these digits, then you have an individual who can be classified an alcoholic. It is unfortunate that during the developing stages there are scarcely, and this is true, as you know, any priests who have the courage to take issue with a brother priest, except those who are always harping about the weaknesses of others anyway; and as you know, this is

a very delicate question. As you approach it yourself today, you just don't make a flat statement; you must be very diplomatic and very cautious. You say, "Joe, I think you are beginning to show signs of not being able to handle your liquor." Usually the Bishop doesn't see the early signs; he gets the full blown case before him. When it does come, I, as a Bishop cannot judge a man and say, categorically, you are an alcoholic. I wouldn't say this of any individual. I may tell a man what is on the record, that there have been incidents of drunkenness and neglect of duty, and scandal, and that they arise from excessive imbibing, but never would I feel in a position to be a judge and tell the man that he is an alcoholic. He must do this himself.

The Alcoholic Priest is Embarrassed

I think that psychologically and spiritually this is a judgment of the individual. The point is that each priest who is suffering not only suffers from an illness, but he suffers from the embarrassment. He must admit with personal conviction, I am an alcoholic. As I know in your meetings, this is the foundation of making an upwardbound movement; that takes humility, a self-abasement, a self-confession to one's interior self, a conscientious judgment. Humility is the virtue that ultimately saves. It is the virtue that saves every one of us in all our weaknesses. And certainly it is the virtue that saves the priest who suffers from the illness of alcoholism.

The frank clear admission to himself then, to his family, to his priestly friends, to his Bishop, that he is an alcoholic is not something to be turned aside, something to be avoided, something to hide.

You know that you have been discussing among yourselves for years how to get a man, a priest, to the point of cooperating, to get him out of the state of resentment, resentment toward the Church, the Bishop, toward the pastor, and toward his fellow priests, his own family. This resentment seems to be part and parcel of the stages that follow upon serious difficulties. There are some who are stubborn in their pride, and they go on and on in their stubbornness and they give excuse after excuse when they are told, even when it is demonstrated, that the excuses are really phoney. Sometimes things must get worse before there is a chance for clear recognition of the weakness. You know that with some personalities, the only course is downward before they can go upward.

On the positive side, the Bishop, as the one consecrated to ordain priests, has a continuing responsibility after ordination. Not only does he have the responsibility to select the candidates for the priesthood and to send them to the Seminary, but he must see that the intellectual life, the spiritual life, the mental life of the priests are always progressing. This is the spirit of Vatican II and its teaching.

We have been given a new commitment, the priestly formation of other priests even among those who have been ordained for decades. When a serious problem arises with the individual priest, there are those who say there were previous situations when the Bishop made a mistake, and this has been said over and over again — the Seminary made a mistake. The blame is always placed on someone else. But aren't those cases really rare? They are really and truly rare. There is no one who is ordained in the Providence of God without a vocation.

The Priesthood Must Be Saved

God would not permit a man to go through the training and the discipline of the Seminary unless there was some spiritual good that was going to come from his priesthood. There is spiritual good that comes from all of your lives. And every priest, no matter where he is tonight, has brought about some spiritual good. We could say that the story of each problem is one of overconfidence in one's ability to consume alcohol or to use it.

The Bishop can never determine, in an individual case, how much liquor a priest can stand. He can't set any formulas in diocesan statutes about the amount of alcohol that can be, or may be consumed by his clergy. He cannot permit the weakness of his priests, the weaker ones of his brothers to be abandoned to the whims of the world, because the Bishop has a familial relationship to each and every individual priest. It is not only because of Incardination, or because of the priestly work that is done by the religious in the diocese which creates a responsibility but also by reason of the God-given bond of sharing the same priesthood that the Bishop must aid his problem priests.

The priesthood is not identified with individuals exclusively. It is the priesthood of Jesus Christ and in Christ; we find strength in His redemption. The Bishop finds the spiritual resources to bring the gifts of the

redemptive act of Christ to the weaker of the brethren.

The Second Vatican Council teaches that all priests, both diocesan and religious, participate in and exercise with the Bishop the one priesthood of Christ, and are thereby constituted prudent cooperators of the episcopal order. And this includes priests in all the endeavors of religious and apostolic life.

As a Bishop, it must be my daily concern that priests continue to be cooperators and that in their cooperation, they are prudent. When a priest fails to measure up to the standard, what must the Bishop do in advising, counselling and giving fraternal correction, in bringing to light the fact that this is a pastoral concern of the episcopacy? We must enter into dialogue with you, with individuals in each diocese. Just as the dialogue in ecumenical affairs, in educational life, and in many other phases of life, this dialogue between the priests and Bishops on a broad scale, and on a particular scale in facing the problems of the clergy, must be realistic, whether these problems be problems of alcoholism, celibacy, or avarice, whatever they may be. And as you know, there are worse sins than alcoholism.

What is more important than the dialogue between the Bishop and the priests is that the priests are willing to have honest dialogue with the Bishop. The lack of honest dialogue may be one of the serious barriers to rehabilitation.

In almost every instance, even though a priest who has a problem of alcoholism says that he will obediently follow the course and the plan set for him by the Bishop, he may still set up certain obstacles toward a real personal fatherly relationship or son's relationship to his father in Christ, the Bishop.

In a small diocese dialogue is easier than in a large one, for when you have a few hundred priests or less, it is easy to know each priest, and it is easy for each priest to know the Bishop. Sometimes, both get to know too much. With our genius for organization there need be no less dialogue in the gigantic dioceses and archdioceses where there are 1000 or perhaps 2000 priests.

Lines of Communication

This is an area where we are trying to establish lines of communication. It seems that every time we make a survey among the laity or clergy today, it centers around a lack, or at least one of the things that is reported is a lack, of communication. Communication is necessary. Applying this to those instances where a priest is beginning his early stages of rehabilitation, personal visits with the Bishop, in an easy informal environment, or in the hospital or in the guest house, or wherever it may be, in his own home, with his own family sometimes are necessary. Also, Bishops have the responsibility of searching out where the shepherds who are weak, are residing, and finding out why they are not communicating.

It must be made known that the Bishop is always available to such a priest, that he can write to him personally and that the priest doesn't have to go through channels, that he can call the Bishop on the phone and tell him at 2 o'clock in the morning that he is having a miserable morning. These things should be welcomed when sincere efforts toward sobriety are being made. The personal relationship must be increased. This is what we do, certainly, in our priestly work in taking care of pastoral duties with the sick. We establish a closer relationship with those in hospitals and those who are sick in their homes, the invalids and the infirm, and those who suffer tragedies in their life. And this is the way it should be in the works of mercy, and the work of love and kindness and understanding, and sympathy toward our sick fellow priests.

Now, there are going to be times of irritation, times of impatience on both sides. We have to understand that the human frame and the human mind can be taxed to the limit sometimes. We must overlook these moments when perhaps a curt or an uncharitable remark may reflect upon the individual weakness. Sensitivity can be an enemy.

And so, as you look upon the Bishop, as you look upon his office, upon him as the chief shepherd of a diocese, as the father of the people of God, and the father of his priests, you must realize that in turn you have obligations to help him fulfill these duties of his office.

A primary responsibility of the Bishop is to his problem priests; when the Bishop and all the priests are truly united, — not that they have to think the same; there may be many difficulties, extreme differences of opinion — but where there is a bond of unity and where they understand one another, there is hope for every problem in the Church.

The Public Forum Not Always Helpful

The unfortunate thing today is that the public forum becomes an agency for relief before the divinely instituted resources are tapped. The public forum is not a place to bring out the weaknesses and the human insecurity of priests. The public forum has its place in public opinion, and public opinion has its value. Public opinion will never save you, nor save me. We shall be saved by using and exercising those fruits of the redemption that pertain to us in our deficiencies, for in Christ our deficiencies are overcome; in Christ, we have strength; in his priesthood we have strength.

The spiritual life of the priest, then, is the foundation of rehabilitation; his prayerful life, his communication with God are basic. He cannot be isolated from God anymore than he can be isolated from the rest of humanity or from his fellow priests.

I remember Cardinal Suenens, in a lecture during the days of the Second Vatican Council, saying one evening that he took a survey of his priests. Among the things that were causing them the most suffering were three: isolation from God, isolation from their fellow priests, and isolation from their Bishop. Now, if we took a survey here this evening, we might find that one or all of these statistics would be verified again. And in the problem of alcoholism, there certainly have been periods in the lives of priests and laymen when there were deep feelings of isolation.

Isolation can be overcome with Christian love and Christian spirituality. The realities of the spirit and the realities of the human personality must be made new again in you. And I would hope that as a result of our discussion this evening, you will have greater confidence in the episcopate and realize that even though a Bishop must take actions that appear sometimes to be very alien to the rehabilitation of a priest who suffers from alcoholism, I am sure that all Bishops today, particularly, have high motivation and high hopes.

This is an age in which we are suffering from a lack of vocations. And every priest who is rehabilitated is one who can serve in a parish, in a hospital, in an orphanage, in a school. And he brings the light of Christ and of his priestly office again, to the world; there is a rebirth to the priestly ministry whenever rehabilitation takes place.

I think that promotion of the rehabilitation of priests who suffer from alcoholism is as important as, and perhaps more important than, even the promotion of vocations. From the standpoint of human thinking, this may be manpower that is being wasted, and if it is on the conscience of any of us that we are the cause for the waste, then the judgment of God will be as severe as for the waste of any food or any temporal gift or spiritual gift that God has given us. And one of the greatest spiritual gifts that God has given mankind is the Holy Priesthood.

I would urge you then, in conclusion, to take up your work anew in this Conference; even though old ideas are repeated, even though old formulas are recited again, there be a renewal of your spirit and a renewal of your zeal and your energy to reach the ideal which has always been before you, since the day that God gave you a vocation to the priesthood. Have the love and the kindness and the charity to go out and seek others whom you may bring into, or back to, the priestly fold.

I ask God's blessing upon you, and I hope that we are going to have a lively discussion about other matters perhaps that I did not cover in this brief talk; but I tell you that it is a talk from the heart and from the spirit of the priesthood and the episcopate — God Bless you.