

KNOW, UNDERSTAND AND DEAL WITH ITAN ADDRESS TO THE NCCA

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My reflections have been inspired by the very beautiful and meaningful prayer put out by your association, a prayer which is based on the Seven Last Words of Jesus as they have been handed down to us in the New Testament.

The prayer ends with the petition: "Always keep reminding me that my program of recovery will be finished only at the moment of my death. Let me never become complacent or careless of my sobriety." I can discern in those words the whole heart and spirit of your council which is now nearing the fortieth anniversary of its foundation. I think it worthwhile to underline some of the characteristics and merits of your work, or rather your apostolate. These can be summed up as the effort to know the roots of the problem, to understand it, and to deal with it in its entirety.

The ancient, but never quite extinguished, Manichaeian temptation is to separate the chaff from the grain before the harvest, and Christ himself has alerted us to the risks that attempt involves. Looking through the Acts of your annual meetings, I have seen that your council's service is inspired with true simplicity and humility, with rigorous competence, and with unquenchable hope and exemplary courage. In manuals of Moral Theology there is often found the maxim: "Bonum ex integra causa, malum e quocumque defectu." We might paraphrase this as saying: a lifetime is not sufficient to become truly good, but to err only requires an instant. The life of everybody is marked by such instants, the sick person and the one taking care of him, the patient and the therapist.

I would add: in your work, so human and fraternal, you are constantly aware that man alone cannot be the only and exclusive curer of the social disorders that afflict humanity.

That is why the plea for help on the part of the person suffering consciously or unconsciously, is a prayer. It is our duty to do all that is necessary — and more than the barely necessary — but always with the understanding that without the help that comes from God our efforts will not be enough.

May I be allowed, therefore, to spend a few words on the three elements which, as I have said, are decisive in tackling the widespread problem of alcoholism.

1. To know the size of the problem

Those who work in this field point out that the negative effects of alcoholism are not limited just to the persons afflicted but also damage those who indirectly suffer the consequences. The range of people who can be affected is something which is obvious to your council which is at work in this field.

We know that in such a way, in a country like the United States, some twenty to fifty percent of the population are affected by alcoholism. On a worldwide scale, the picture is truly alarming. This problem is not confined to one particular region or category of people, but is something which is diffused throughout the human race. It is a reality with which we all have to live.

No negative phenomenon can be tackled until it is adequately known. Knowing it does not just mean bringing light to bear on its outlines, but understanding all its component parts and effects, physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual.

Alcohol is still the most widespread drug in the world and its biggest snare consists in the infinite range its expressions and manifestations can take, its durability in time, the difficulty of finding appropriate treatment which is effective within a brief space of time.

Knowledge of the problem which, in the face of its enormity and vastness, limited itself to mere deploration of this state of affairs would be useless and a waste of time.

The phenomenon has to be known in order to be challenged, studied to be remedied, even if the chances of a definitive victory over it are remote.

There is a truth that we priests should never forget: we are called to live out our consecration amid

limitations and difficulties, and always accompanied by our own weakness and fragility from which we shall be completely liberated only when we enter the fullness of light and life.

This might be a temptation to shut our eyes to personal difficulties or to the evils of the world. The strength of our witness is to be found in recognizing with humility and accepting with trust and confidence the truth of our human condition, so as to practice a constant spiritual and supernatural renewal of our life. To know ourselves is a basic requirement for effecting any kind of improvement, along with the will to regain what has been lost.

2. To understand the phenomenon

Many years at work in the field of human suffering have demonstrated many times a simple truth to me: as the sick person receives help from the doctor, so too the health worker gets help from the patient.

Transferred into the field of your ministry, this truth becomes even more real because it is connected to the reality and effective recognition of the brotherhood of the priesthood.

There is a fire that destroys and reduces to ashes, and there is a fire which burns without ash and which gives light and warmth. Whoever has personal experience of alcoholism undergoes a negative experience from which, without doubt, he can derive some basic truths on which to build his restoration to health.

We need to know the evil not just in itself and in its devastating effects, but also its causes, immediate and remote, in order to learn something of benefit to ourselves and others. Every form of suffering demands a high price of humanity and, therefore, can constitute a lesson about life. We must know and study at depth this price, so as to be able to place a positive value on it.

Virtue is not the mere absence of sin. If it were, it would be cold and arid. The unnamed sinner in the Gospel of John obtained great clemency from Jesus because she had loved much. Chesterton once said that error is a truth that has gone mad, and I would add that sin is likewise a virtue out of control, that is, misdirected generosity, a vitality put at the service of evil. But it is still generosity and vitality, and these must not be ignored or smothered but regained, valued and redirected towards good. We do not draw near to those afflicted by alcoholism to judge them heartlessly but to understand them with charity; not to condemn them with disgust but to embrace them with understanding so that they can find within themselves the means to come to a new human and spiritual awakening which itself can be nourished by the very impulse that previously had been at the service of the fragile side of human nature.

3. To cure it in its entirety

Research studies on alcoholism demonstrate that its effects, both on those who are affected directly by the disease and on those who undergo the consequences, involve the whole personality of the individual and many affect many different aspects of society.

It is precisely here that I see the distinguishing — and original — mark of your Council, so richly deserving the unqualified praise of the Church.

The knowledge of the causes of a pathological phenomenon point the way towards its treatment. But where the highest qualities of the human person are compromised, that is, the spiritual qualities, then it is here that we have to start work towards a gradual recovery of the person, with courage and constancy too, if the remedy is to be effective.

Your apostolate translates into action the truly Christian concept of “*compassio*” which is not an attitude of proud superiority, unjust and calculated compassion, but rather the ability to be alongside someone in ceaseless brotherhood.

One has to bend towards the other in order to help him to get up, without making judgments; the effectiveness of the fraternal help offered consists in this basic humility.

In the experience of someone who is trying to overcome alcoholism, the prayer of the person seeking a miracle in the Gospel is of value: “Lord, I do believe, but help my faith to grow.”

The priest or religious, any consecrated person who is trying to overcome a negative habit, is greatly assisted by the idea of refinding a higher good to which he had dedicated himself with generous self sacrifice. In your praiseworthy work, infirmity and remedial therapy are aided by ideals which are not unknown or new to the person in care, but only weakened or temporarily lost. To find them once again is to rediscover one’s

vocation to holiness, a vocation embraced with joy once even if afterwards subjected to the experience of a grave crisis. It is a matter of finding again that love which was the origin of one's vocation and which has not been extinguished since life itself, in every heartbeat is a ceaseless quest for love.

Modern techniques of therapy, medical and psychological, are precious tools that we cannot do without, but they are not everything. Professional training of health care personnel is indispensable, but it is not sufficient alone.

In the particular case of alcoholism, the effectiveness of the therapy depends to a great extent on the will to stay sober. And when the basic values of the priesthood are at stake, these must be remembered and account taken of them, their natural and supernatural worth and richness, their fascination. To regain these values means returning to being ministers of love, redemption, and salvation for others.

The goal of therapy is not just the rewinning of physical health so much as the joyous recovery of one's vocation; it is a return, waited and longed for not just in the depth of the individual's own heart, but by all those who now and love that person and who need his help.

May God abundantly bless your council, and may He bless all of you. To you goes our gratitude for your strength of soul, your humility, tenacity and will, your love for the priesthood, the Church and Christ, the example you give to all the People of God as a sign of hope and, above all, of perseverance in the search for all that is good — a good that is refined by the experience of sacrifice and suffering, and therefore a good that sets free and redeems, a true and not illusory aim of love.

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