

PARISH PREACHING ON ALCOHOLISM

Rev. John Fulford, C.Ss.R.

*The Blue Book, Vol. XXX, 1978
New Orleans, Louisiana*

All of us, in one form or another, are seeking to accomplish the will of God in various ways. As therapist, counselor, lecturer, retreat master, educator, each of us is trying to carry the message to the suffering alcoholic and his or her family. In my present full-time apostolate during these past twenty-seven months I have been carrying the message on the parish level. My task now is to explain what we seek to do for the parishioners in the many parishes where I have spoken and how we strive to attain the objective we set ourselves. I speak at all the Sunday Masses of obligation, on Saturday and Sunday. What I seek to do and how I seek to accomplish the objectives is explained in this Sunday talk. Rather than dissect this talk in a clinical or conversational way, I choose to give you this just as I do on Sunday morning. The only further preamble I would make is to ask you to note the information regarding alcoholism that can be found, I think, in this Sunday talk, where I have the captive audience. It proved to be an unlooked for bonus, inasmuch as I thought at the start that all I would accomplish by the Sunday talk would simply be the invitation to attend the two midweek talks. Now, at this point, I would ask you to make believe. Make believe that you are a parishioner in attendance at one of these Sunday Masses. And I, in turn, will make believe that I am delivering the homily to many, many people who perhaps have never heard the word alcoholism mentioned from the pulpit, and certainly have not heard an entire homily devoted to it. Now we begin to make believe.

* * *

I am Father Jack, and I am alcoholic. Now please believe me when I assure you at the outset that I do not introduce myself to you in this fashion as any cheap sensational ploy to try and grab your attention. Rather, I pray to God, and I mean this most sincerely, I pray to God that I could introduce myself to you, and you in turn could listen to such an introduction: "I am Father Jack, and I am an alcoholic," as noncommittally as though I were to introduce myself to you, and I can with equal truth, "I am Father Jack, and I am a diabetic." By noncommittally, I mean simply this, that like anybody in his right mind, I am not at all overjoyed to have been struck down by so dread and devastating a disease as that of alcoholism. But, neither am I so cast down into a chasm of gloom and fear, even despair, that I feel destined to walk the rest of my days in utter hopelessness, hopeless that I can ever walk tall among my fellowmen and among my fellow priests. Hopeless that I can ever live a productive, a fruitful, a blessed, a serene, a happy, a priestly life. Just the opposite is true. For while alcoholism is a disease, while it is a disease that is incurable, and while it is a disease that is one hundred percent fatal, it is also thanks be to God, a disease that can be arrested, a disease that can be rendered inactive, so that its ravages no longer make a shambles, an utter ruin, and a destruction of everything that is noble and good and decent and worthwhile and blessed and joyous in a person's life. Ethyl alcohol is what we are talking about here, and believe me, it does not make a bit of difference whether it is in the form of beer or wine or vodka or gin or whiskey or liqueur, because the common denominator in all of them is ethyl alcohol. Ethyl alcohol is a drug. We do not commonly think of alcohol as being a drug, and perhaps we do not like to think of it that way, but all we mean by a drug is a chemical substance that is mind-changing, mood-altering and that affects the person's central nervous system. Alcohol fills the definition to a tee. It always seems strange to me that the same chemical can be at once the source of so much pleasure and the source of so much pain. That it is the source of so much pleasure, I think, is undeniable. It does act as a sort of social lubricant, it does add to the merriment, the fun, the enjoyment, the pleasures, the camaraderie of a festive occasion, the gathering together of friends and relatives. I would be an out and out hypocrite if I tried to deny that, and I do not. Moreover, I am not in your midst as any sort of prohibitionist attempting to thunder any "Thou shalt not . . ." at anyone with regard to the use of alcohol. "Thou shalt not use alcohol because it is always morally evil." I do not believe it is. "Thou shalt not drink alcohol because it is always harmful, whether physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually." I do not believe that it is.

I do believe that we would have to have our heads buried in the sand not to recognize that there are a

number of us, and tragically our number is legion, who, because of the body chemistry we have, a chemistry that in all probability we inherited, cannot drink ethyl alcohol. If we choose to use the drug alcohol for social purposes, we may be able to do so for a time in a social way, but inevitably, inexorably, we will cross an invisible, but a very real line from social drinking to alcoholic drinking. And by social drinking I mean controlled drinking, moderate drinking, non-harmful drinking, pleasurable drinking, drinking that remains a matter of choice, we can take it or leave it alone. We will cross that invisible, but very real, line into uncontrolled, immoderate, harmful, painful, destructive, compulsive drinking. This is precisely what we mean by the disease of alcoholism.

Alcoholism is Incurable

We have said that this disease is incurable and so it is. At least at the present moment; it could change tomorrow, and please God it would. At least at this moment there is no known therapy, there is no known treatment, there is no as yet discovered drug that can return a person from destructive, compulsive alcoholic drinking back to controlled or social drinking. It has never been done in the history of this disease, though hundreds of thousands have broken their lives in the vain attempt to prove themselves to be the solitary exception. It is a disease that is incurable. It is a disease, moreover, that is one hundred percent fatal, unless we would want to consider as an exception, and I hardly think that we can, a person who would ingest, drink, so much alcohol, destroy so many brain cells that he would have to be confined to an asylum, to breathe out the rest of his days as nothing more than a living death? And this does happen. It happens in thousands of instances, and far more frequency if the person crosses the line to compulsive and destructive drinking. Just as certainly as I am standing before you this alcohol will attack and destroy one or more vital organs in the body, the brain cells, the heart, the pancreas, the liver, the central nervous system, whatever, and will cause the person's death in an excruciatingly painful fashion. It is incurable, it is fatal.

It is also, thanks be to God, a disease that can be arrested, a disease that can be rendered inactive so that it no longer destroys everything that is noble and decent and worthwhile and good and blessed in a person's life. To this end of arresting the insidious and powerful disease of alcoholism we have a God given means. The means of medicine, the means of psychology, but far and away the most effective, the most powerful means of all has to be, and is, the spiritual means as embodied, as expressed, as lived in the programs of life such as Alcoholics Anonymous for the victim of the disease, and Al-Anon and Alateen for the members of the family, who not infrequently suffer just as excruciatingly as does the victim himself, or herself. It is precisely because the spiritual means are the most effective in arresting this disease that I, for one, firmly believe that Holy Mother Church has a valid role to play in seeking to help the people of God, if at all possible, to avert this dread disease; and if that is no longer possible, because it has struck, then to arrest the ravages of this disease. That is why I am in your midst this morning. That is why I went to my religious superior about three years ago and asked if I could give the rest of my priestly life toward helping those who are the victims of this disease and their families. That is why I firmly believe, call it wishful thinking if you will, but it is a conviction of mine nevertheless, that Almighty God allowed me to be felled by this disease and to endure its agony for a time so that he could use me as an instrument in bringing a message of help and hope to His beloved people. That is why I am with you this morning; that is why I will be with you on Monday and Tuesday evening in your parish hall to present a talk, followed by a question and answer period, on the subject of alcoholism.

On Monday evening at 7:30 we will have the first talk on the nature of alcoholism, what it is. Believe me there are many erroneous, many false ideas, many old wives' tales told over and over again almost as though in the retelling a measure of truth would be granted. I know, because I entertained those ideas myself. If the pattern of your life is similar to mine, this could be abysmal ignorance. I did not even know there was such a thing as a disease of alcoholism until I was a victim. I will try to explain secondly what brings it about. Why is it that some people can drink, and can drink a considerable volume with considerable frequency, even daily, with no grace or continuing harm, at least that I know of? Others of us, even if we drank the same amount or less, would cross that line into compulsive and destructive drinking. What causes that? What does alcohol do to a person, not just to the alcoholic, not just to the problem drinker, a person who is having problems in his home, with regard to his job, or his health, not just the heavy drinker, the social drinker, but to anyone who at any time ingests alcohol? What does it do to the brain cell? What does it do to the liver? What does it do to us

emotionally, mentally? Finally, in this first talk we will try to delineate the various stages by which a person can and does progress, if he has the body chemistry and uses the drug alcohol, toward the acute and chronic state of alcoholism.

The second talk, on Tuesday evening, will be first on the God given means of arresting the disease, pre-eminently, as we mentioned, the spiritual means. Secondly, what help we can bring to the members of the family who often times, as I mentioned a moment ago, suffer inexpressibly. Sometimes the emotional trauma that is brought to the children and to the partner in marriage will remain a lifetime. I shall explain what we can do to help them, and to help them to help themselves. Finally, we will present some strategy, some ways and means, some technique, whereby hopefully we can get help to a person whom we love, but a person who steadfastly resists and rejects and stonewalls and denies even the necessity of help of any kind. What we can do possible to help them, in spite of themselves. This invitation is extended to all.

It is extended with a sense of urgency because this truly is a matter of life and death. I do not exaggerate when I make that statement. I know because I was there. I will always remember the words of Dr. Russell Smith, the medical director of Guest House, when I was a patient there, telling us over and over again, not as a scare tactic, but simply as a matter of fact: "Fathers, you have three ways to go: abstinence, insanity, or death." Everything and anything that I have learned, in the intervening eight years by active participation in AA, by reading everything I could get my hands on concerning the topic, by having had the opportunity of addressing thousands in hospitals and alcoholic wards, by having the opportunity of speaking to over 400,000 people, principally in the Archdiocese of Detroit, and in turn listening to many of them . . . everything that I have learned serves only to confirm the accuracy of that grim statement. For those of us who cross the line, there is only abstinence, insanity, or death.

Alcoholism Has Reached Epidemic Proportions

Secondly, there is a matter of epidemic proportions in our land, in our day. I do not believe that any lay person, and I am a lay person in a field of medicine, should use the word epidemic on his own, and I do not. I am simply echoing the sentiment, the thought, the conviction of those who are most knowledgeable in the field of medical science in this disease. Of the ninety-three million people in our country who choose to use the drug alcohol for social purposes, at least ten million of us have crossed the line into acute and chronic alcoholism. Our youth, taking their example from their elders, have made it without any doubt a drug of choice. It is so easy to obtain, it is within the reach of their pocketbook and it is so sociably acceptable; everybody seems to be doing it. I do not think we can find one principal of one high school or even of a junior high school who would not tell us that following every dance, every prom, every get-together of a large number of our youth, the whole area is littered with beer cans and wine bottles and whiskey bottles. I have shuddered when I hear parents, as I sometimes do, say, "Thank God, Father, my teenage Mary, or my teenage John is not on drugs." What they are telling me is this, that they are thanking God that they are not popping pills, they are not smoking pot, they are not taking uppers or downers, they are not sniffing glue, or snuffing cocaine, or shooting heroin. They have good reason to thank God, but almost in the same breath, "But Father, they're drinking entirely too much. Thank God, though, they are not on drugs." If they are on alcohol, they are on a drug. Alcohol is a drug.

My heart goes out in sympathy when this disease strikes in a family. So often, mothers and fathers, members of the family say, "Father, I don't know what's hit him. I don't know where to turn, I don't know where to look, I don't know where to seek help, I don't know how to cope with this thing." Providence perhaps is offering us the opportunity on a silver platter of attaining some accurate information regarding this number three killer in our land today.

I wish to God that I could give you the garb of a priest, or better still, ask you to fill the role that Providence is asking me to fill at the present time, and to hear just a few of the stories of anguish and heartbreak and pain and shame absolutely indescribable. They would be to you completely incomprehensible, unless you have been there. Only consider, of the fifty thousand deaths that occur on our city streets and highways every year, at least twenty-five thousand are directly and exclusively attributable to the drug alcohol. Twenty thousand of our suicides and our homicides are directly and exclusively attributable to the drug alcohol. Eight times

the number of people who are addicted to all the other drugs in the world are addicted to the drug alcohol. Small wonder that we extend this invitation with courtesy, but also with a sense of urgency. Whether you choose to accept or whether you choose not to accept this invitation, has to remain, and properly so, a matter of your own personal decision.

“It Hasn’t Touched My Life”

Only two things I would beg of you, and they are these. Please in God’s name, do not say to yourself, “It hasn’t touched my life; it hasn’t caused any problem for me or any members of my family, at least not that I know of; therefore, this invitation is not for me.” Believe me it is. This disease is no respecter of persons whatever. It can strike down, and it does strike those as young as twelve and thirteen years of age, and this is much too serious a subject to use any figures lightly. Or it may not have its onset until the person is in his fifties, sixties, or even seventies. It does not make a particle of difference whether we have the IQ of a genius or the IQ of an illiterate, whether we live in a millionaire’s mansion or in a pauper’s hovel, or whether we are the product of an excellent home or a product of a broken home. It strikes down indiscriminately. I firmly believe that at one time or another your voice may be the one voice in all God’s world that can penetrate the barrier of resistance that alcoholic has built in front of himself or herself. Let your voice not only be a voice of compassion, but let it be a voice filled with knowledge as well.

The second thing I would beg of you would be this: Please do not say to yourself, “I would rather like to go. I think I could get something out of it. I know I could, but I had better not because if I do, I am tipping my hand, I am letting it be known in the community or parish that I am having a problem with alcohol, or somebody in the family is, and I don’t want to run that risk.” Believe me you are not. The vast percentage of those who have responded favorably to this invitation do not have the problem themselves. It is not necessarily present in the family at this time. Without doubt the loveliest compliment paid to me in these past twenty-seven months was by a little lady, a bit beyond middle years, immaculately groomed, completely charming in personality, who came up to me after the evening talk and said to me, “Thank you, Father. I don’t have any problem with alcohol. I seldom drink. My husband is dead, there was no problem there. My children are all raised; they have families of their own; as far as I know it hasn’t touched any of their lives. But thank you, Father, because now for the first time I understand what alcoholism is and what alcohol can do to a person. I can and I do forgive my father, for all the heartbreak and for all the pain he brought to me and the other members of the family by his abuse of alcohol.”

My final words are a prayer for prayer, if you will. Will you in your kindness whisper a little prayer now and again, that if it be the will of God, His blessing may be found on this new found missionary apostolate of ours, and we may serve as a reasonably fit instrument in the hands of God to bring this message of help and hope to the people of God for love of God. May God bless you.

© Copyright 2003 National Catholic Council on Alcoholism and Related Drug Problems, Inc.