

# THE PEOPLE OF GOD AND ALCOHOLISM

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There is some speculation that the Bishops of the United States might make a statement concerning alcoholism and drug addiction. Here's what I would say if I were the one to write their message to Catholics and to all the citizens of this country:

"We, the American Bishops, recognize that alcoholism and drug addiction have been wreaking horrible damage upon the people of this country for many years. The damage extends through all levels of society — old and young, Church-goers and non-Church-goers alike. The damage is often so insidious that we do not even associate such tragedies as early death, family break-up, suicide, automobile accidents, and job loss with excessive drinking. We, as Bishops, must ask ourselves if there is something for us to say about this grave social problem beyond a general encouragement to let the Gospel guide us in this struggle. Have the medical, social welfare, and treatment professionals taken care of this problem sufficiently? Do we have nothing left to offer but encouragement?

"Our answer is that as religious leaders we, indeed, have a special obligation and a specific message to deliver. We believe this message should be conveyed in two stages. First, we want to honor and acknowledge the remarkable achievement of recovery through the Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-Anon programs. Second, we wish to make some recommendations as to how we, as Church, are called upon to contribute to the recovery of our damaged society.

"Though not first suggested by Alcoholics Anonymous, it is through AA that alcoholism has become accepted as a disease in our society. The disease concept, which enables us to make the basic distinction between alcoholism and "heavy drinking," is fundamental in creating the opening for spiritual help for those struggling with alcohol and drugs. In years past, victims of the disease were condemned to trying the impossible — to ridding themselves of not only excessive drinking, but of all the mental and emotional turmoil surrounding the obsession. The first step of the AA recovery program, in which the alcoholic is invited to admit he is "powerless" over alcohol, creates a deep acceptance of one's own abiding need, which in turn liberates the AA member to take the positive action that leads to real recovery.

"It is a widely observed paradox in our society that those problem drinkers who describe themselves as alcoholic, and thus powerless over alcohol, are almost all sober. And those who have had trouble with alcohol and tend to minimize the "drinking issue" seem to continue drinking in a most destructive way. The way AA members handle the disease concept serves as an encouragement to all of us to apply the Gospel message that we are in daily radical need of support and mercy from God. This matter-of-fact acceptance of a condition of deep need on the part of those recovering from alcoholism can serve to unmask our fear of having problems and shortcomings that will never, and need never, be completely resolved. Just as the alcoholic's recovery depends upon an ongoing acceptance of his disease as a permanent condition, so also spiritual and personal growth rests upon a thoroughgoing acceptance of our past failures and present limitations.

"Another aspect of the AA achievement is the discovery that recovery always takes place in fellowship. It works in groups only. A bias towards individual spiritual struggle on the part of many believers and towards one-on-one therapy on the part of the educated elite has led countless alcoholics to deterioration and despair. We shouldn't actually be surprised that the group setting evokes a healthy humility, opens one to nourishment from others, and gives the opportunity to serve; and yet we are surprised to discover that throughout our society over a million sufferers from addiction and alcoholism are recovering in groups held together by a simple straightforward spiritual program. It is difficult to maintain grandiosity in a group — they all laugh.

"This phenomenon of group recovery can enrich our understanding of Jesus' words: 'Wherever two or three are gathered . . .' Isn't it only in identifying with the faith of the other that one's own faith is sparked? Isn't it only in joining in prayer that one's own prayer is deepened and purified? Isn't it only in welcoming the stranger into community that we find the chance to serve as Christ the Lord serves us?

"A third highlight of the twelve-step programs is something we could call the Al-Anon phenomenon.

Relatives of alcoholics and addicts discover they need recovery in their own right. It seems we always try to help the excessive drinker in the wrong way. On the one hand, we tend to ‘baby’ the addict with inappropriate help, such as loans of money, lies to protect his job, and so forth. This only obscures the effects of the drinking, thus enabling continued deterioration. On the other hand, we can’t resist nagging, lecturing, explaining, and finally avoiding the alcoholic out of a mixed feeling of support and frustration. In the end we always tend to give a neurotic attention that implies that if the drinker would only shape up, we would all be all right. We try to control instead of heal.

“Recovery for the family member comes about when he or she acknowledges a true powerlessness over the alcoholic and a continued vulnerability to manipulation. Recovery continues by practicing the same twelve steps that the alcoholic and addict must live. Instead of trying to change the alcoholic, the Al-Anon member gathers support from the group to withdraw from old reactive behavior and to build a respectful, realistic, and loving treatment of him or herself and the alcoholic. The Al-Anon member discovers that the most effective way to help the alcoholic is to withdraw from the game of sick manipulation and to attend to his or her own recovery. Recovery involves purifying love by clarifying responsibility.

“This Al-Anon phenomenon offers all of us a way to discern when our efforts to help are unrealistic or patronizing. We even find it helpful to regard Jesus our Lord as a kind of perfect Al-Anon. He accomplished His great work of salvation without violence, worldly power, or any other kind of manipulation — even persuasion. He simply, in a relentless way, with fidelity and courage, announces the Kingdom. That is, He tells us the truth about ourselves, loves us wholeheartedly, and waits for our answer. When we answer with faith, our hearts are transformed. When we reject Him, He still looks back at us with hard truth and patient love. In no case does He take a shortcut through our freedom and dignity.

“Our suggestions for action in combating this dread disease will follow from the living legacy of AA and Al-Anon, which we have outlined:

- “First, we urge all in need, who suffer from the disease of alcoholism and drug addiction, to humbly receive the help already available in Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, and Al-Anon. That one can do it alone or in one’s own way is an illusion. It is not a sign of moral weakness for a person to admit he needs help.

- “Second, we urge all members of the Church, clergy and laity, to humbly open our minds to the witness of recovering alcoholics and family members. We live in a society in which drinking and drug problems are clouded with stigma and denial. The fact is that anyone who comes into contact with a drinking alcoholic is seriously affected by the disease; that means all of us. We need the clarity provided by recovering people to discern even what excessive drinking is. We have so adjusted to early stage alcoholism that we hesitate to differentiate it from social drinking. We need support from recovering people to gain the willingness to get help for serious problem situations, so accustomed are we to accommodating ourselves to the denial.

- “Third, and more specifically, we urge an even broader educational effort be built into our parishes, schools, and especially our seminaries. A seminar now and then is not enough. In a society which actually encourages and makes money from excessive drinking, only consistent quality education will allow us to exercise Christian responsibility to those affected by alcoholism. And, in one way or another, that means all of us. We must grow past any ‘institutionalized’ acceptance of excessive drinking.

“We wish to acknowledge and encourage the work of alcoholic education and recovery already flourishing under Church sponsorship. We commend the National Clergy Council on Alcoholism, started by Father Ralph Pfau in 1949, which has done an outstanding job of lowering the stigma of alcoholism among the clergy. We applaud the retreat movement for recovering alcoholics and family members, which has grown largely under the sponsorship of Catholic retreat houses. Innovative alcohol and drug awareness programs have been established in many high schools and parishes. We look for the NCCA to continue to publicize the best of what is already being done, and to develop additional programs needed by parishes and schools.

“In conclusion, we believe it is the responsibility of all of us to sharpen our awareness of alcoholism and drug addiction as real diseases that can yield to real recovery. We are all compromised by our reaction to these diseases and need continual help and enlightenment. We, as a Church, take active interest in creating programs of education and recovery.”