

breaking the silence

DRUG USE
AND DRUG ADDICTION

THE IRISH BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

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There are very few of us in Ireland who have not been touched by addiction. Many of us had a parent or a grandparent, an uncle or aunt with an alcohol problem. Parents nowadays anxiously wonder if their own children will avoid the dangerous temptations of Ecstasy or cannabis. Many walk in fear of being robbed or attacked by someone with a craving for drugs.

When we talk about substance misuse we mean any use of drugs which causes harm. Our principal focus is on street drugs. There has been a huge rise in their distribution and use.

Families and whole communities are starting to discuss drug problems, to express their abhorrence of drug dealing, to seek treatment programmes for people addicted to drugs and to develop prevention programmes for youth.

A National Concern

Drugs are not just a city problem. Drugs are not just a Dublin problem. The first person in Ireland to die from Ecstasy was not a teenager from the city. He was a 27-year-old in a country town.

The death of a young man or woman is a tragedy. But so too is the messed-up life of a teenager who drops out of school because of cannabis or the disruption of a family shattered by a parent's drinking.

What can we do to prevent the harm and to heal the heartbreak where it has already occurred?

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Every human being feels the need to belong, the need to find meaning in life. Drugs seem to promise a buzz of excitement in a dreary life, a sense of solidarity for a person who feels excluded and alone, the thrill of defying a world that seems to offer no fulfilment.

The promise is deceptive. Excitement turns to the despair of dependency, solidarity to the isolation of becoming absorbed in one's own need for drugs. Defiance too often yields only the powerlessness of a broken life and an early death.

The need for meaning and for solidarity is what the Gospel of Christ addresses. It offers a happiness and a belonging which far exceed anything we could provide, or even imagine, for ourselves.

The hunger for meaning and belonging is the deepest thing in every human heart. In the end, it is a hunger for God who loves us more than we love ourselves. Our hearts are restless until they rest in God. People try in many ways to satisfy that hunger. They do it through the pursuit of affluence, through seeking power and influence. These can never satisfy us, because our hunger is for God. One of the most destructive ways of seeking to satisfy our longing for happiness and belonging is the misuse of drugs – alcohol, cannabis, cocaine.

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Drugs and Poverty

Those who see themselves as excluded from affluence and power are particularly vulnerable to the illusory attraction of drugs. Heroin and other opiates frequently go hand-in-hand with poverty and social deprivation. Opiate drugs are often used to block out feelings of misery and hopelessness. It is easy to see why some people have tried these highly addictive drugs.

Are we prepared to recognise and remedy the root causes of inequality? It is painful to grow up seeing yourself shut out from the prosperity of others around you. Can we ask people to turn their backs on the deceptive solace of drugs, if we are not prepared to join them in seeking remedies and ways out of the poverty trap?

Drugs and Faith Vacuum

Each faith tradition has its own framework of beliefs and values. While they are sometimes perceived as restrictions, they enrich freedom and purpose. Truth, honesty, respect and caring for others all enrich life rather than cramp its development. A mature faith enables and motivates young and old to resist the pushers, the peer pressure, the illusory freedom of drug taking. Many, as illustrated in the parable of the Prodigal Son, abandon the father's house in search of freedom and adventure. The further we depart from God, the easier it is to dull conscience, live aimlessly and mistake immediate exhilaration for lasting happiness. The faith vacuum accommodates more easily the advance of the 'merchants of death'.¹

1. Pope John Paul II, Address on Drugs & Alcoholism against Life, November 1991.

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How can the Community Help?

What can be done for those who are already dependent on drugs? What, for instance, can the mother and father of two young children do, if not only one but both parents have become dependent on heroin?

If they are lucky, they can get into a treatment programme. There are programmes which offer assessment and counselling, methadone maintenance or detoxification where appropriate, family support and aftercare, and rehabilitation to help them rebuild their lives again.

We welcome these programmes and we call for more of them to be established.

We believe that where well-run local treatment programmes are in operation, providing a comprehensive service in co-operation with the community, they solve many problems for the users and for the local people. Services that offer a full range of options are better equipped to help people reach their full potential for recovery. These options should include the goal of becoming completely drug free, if possible, rather than continuing to use methadone if this is not necessary. Other aspects of the complete service include not only counselling and back-up for addicts and their families, but also prevention and early intervention supports for the young people of the community. There has been a significant drop in crime in the area surrounding a city suburb where a satellite clinic opened a year ago.

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We call on the people in our communities to support these efforts and to work with the statutory authorities to ensure their success.

Whether or not we come from a family affected by substance misuse, we must all have compassion for those hurt by addiction. We hope that these clinics will always offer a drug-free option to those who can attain it. We owe a drug-free environment and culture to children yet unborn.

More is asked of the Christian

Are we, as a Christian people guided by God's word and the Holy Spirit, prepared to do without personal benefits to enable the Government to provide effective services and supports in our communities? This is part of the privilege and price of being 'The Body of Christ'. So closely are we related that 'if one part suffers, all suffer together, if one part flourishes, all rejoice together' (1 Cor 12:26). Are we prepared to make the implied sacrifices of Christian care?

Christians are meant to recognise one another as brothers and sisters. We are meant to understand that each of us is part of a solidarity which knows the hunger for happiness, the fallibility and sinfulness, the limitations and the inevitability of death which are part of every human life. We have the hope which believes that there is a meaning which is stronger than any of the things that frighten us. There is a promise of happiness which can always be relied upon because it is the promise of God.

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We should be finding ways to share that solidarity and hope with those who have sought these things along the cul-de-sac of drug misuse. We can do that only if we are prepared to make the necessary sacrifices. We can do that only if people can see in our lives the solidarity and hope that comes from faith in the victory of Jesus over abandonment and death.

Voluntary and Statutory Services

We compliment the workers in the voluntary and statutory services for their great contribution to healing and rehabilitating those trapped by addiction. They have struggled, often alone and sparsely resourced, in a land that was sometimes unaware or too frightened or unwilling to face the reality of the advancing tide of drugs. They have cared generously, taken risks, shown deep understanding and compassion. Care of the battered, broken and dispirited people struggling with drugs calls for the deep love and understanding exemplified in the Good Samaritan who gives us our model of care.

Many drug users have been helped through the efforts of services working together. Some have found work or training programmes. Not all are drug free, but many have improved the stability of their lives and reduced the harm caused by drugs.

Drugs – The Potential for Harm

There are many families not affected by heroin, but concerned about problems arising from Ecstasy, cannabis or alcohol. What can we say to an anxious

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mother or father living in any part of Ireland with a son or daughter who has admitted smoking 'hash'? Drugs like cannabis and Ecstasy (and alcohol when it is abused) can damage a person's character and have real potential for harm. They can become inordinately important to a user, sometimes creating a psychological dependence. Users have been known to lose jobs, drop out of courses of study, damage their health, steal from their families, lose their friends and their faith. These drugs too have real potential for harm.

Anxious parents should not retreat behind a wall of silence, shame or guilt if their son or daughter uses these drugs. Instead, there are some concrete measures which they and all of us should take.

We must break the silence.

We must understand the nature of substance misuse.

We must each out to those hurt by drugs and addiction.

We must collaborate in seeking ways to prevent substance misuse.

Breaking the Silence

Breaking the silence means sharing the tangle of feelings – pain, hurt, shame, fear – experienced if a son or daughter, friend or neighbour, parent or spouse, is abusing alcohol or drugs. It means not denying or minimising the problem.

To the anxious parent, we can say: you do not have to suffer in silence, or fall out with your family over it. Talk about the problem and seek help for the sake of the whole family.

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Understanding Substance Misuse

We must develop a better understanding of substance misuse and addiction. It is not right that the dealers in drugs should understand the nature of addiction better than those who seek to heal or prevent it. We should educate ourselves about the nature of drugs, what makes them attractive, how dependence develops, and how denial, division and dissent often follow in their path.

We should reflect on how we and our families use and sometimes abuse substances. We, the adults, should listen to the young members of our families and communities and learn from them. Young people should help parents to understand what to them is a new and frightening phenomenon.

Reaching Out

We must reach out to those hurt by drugs. This includes the users of drugs, their families, and their communities.

The long experience of AA and Narcotics Anonymous reinforces our conviction that healing is possible with, as they put it, 'the help of a Higher Power'. We believe that the Higher Power is God who is love and who never abandons those who trust in him. Healing is possible for all those hurt by addiction – users and their families.

If we become aware of an addiction problem, we should not ignore it. God's healing power often comes through another person, and that person could be you.

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We do not have to tolerate the wrecked lives that are caused by excessive use of alcohol. We should certainly not make it easy for addicts to go on using drugs that cause harm. We should do our best to get advice and help and to encourage others to do so. As long as addicts are prepared to take steps towards their own recovery, we should support them in their search and struggle.

Working Together for Prevention

Prevention of drug misuse is a major task for the whole community. Each of us must play our part. Dealers make a lot of money out of drugs. They target vulnerable young people. We need to focus on those young people in our efforts to protect them from harm.

We are only beginning to understand what is needed to prevent the harm that substance misuse can cause. While schools have introduced programmes for prevention, it cannot be left to the schools alone. Every family must also be active. We must make use of the available resources in parenting programmes, school programmes and community development to create a safer society where the curious will not become chronic drug users.

Since we do not yet have all the answers, we must search together, as a community, to find effective ways to enable our young people to withstand the dangers of drugs.

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At State level, we must persuade the Government to fund more preventive projects and to undertake more research into drug prevention. We recognise that there is no single drug prevention programme suitable for all. What is suitable in one area may not work in another.

In Ireland, we are justifiably proud of our education systems and their high standards. Education has traditionally provided a route to advancement and to reducing the causes of inequality. As part of a programme to prevent drug misuse and to reduce inequality, it is vital that all our young people receive appropriate general education. This requires an effort to provide curricula which are suited to the various cultures and abilities of the students, and which are interesting and relevant enough to keep the students in school at least up to the school-leaving age. It is well known that early school leavers are a particularly vulnerable group.

Activities which challenge the sense of adventure and curiosity of the young are also necessary. The thousands of volunteers and professionals involved in sporting and community activities for our young people are providing positive alternatives to drug taking.

Prevention of substance misuse comes much nearer home. Every aspect of healthy child-rearing, love, encouragement and, particularly, good communication has its place in this gigantic task. As neighbours and community we can support the efforts of parents. So too can the statutory bodies where appropriate.

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We believe that the Church has two very important contributions to make.

Becoming Active

We call on all Church members to become active in seeking constructive solutions to the drug problem, in the four ways already mentioned:

- Breaking the silence
- Understanding more about substance misuse
- Reaching out to those hurt by drugs and addiction
- Working together for prevention

Sharing Information

We are aware that parish teams and clergy are often among the first to be approached by people affected by drugs. They are often asked ‘What should I do?’ or ‘Where can I turn for help?’

Our plan is that in each diocese there will be at least one designated person who can answer these questions for interested parishioners, and who will provide a link into the network of services offered by statutory, non-statutory and voluntary bodies, including parish groups. That person will be aware of the efforts being made in drug prevention throughout the country. The aim is that this information will be passed on to any parish member who wants to know or take action.

Through this sharing and collaboration we hope to empower people to find their own solutions, to avail themselves of existing resources and, where necessary, to devise new solutions. We hope that this will enable

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the power of God to work in us, in tackling drug problems and in creating a valuable network of prevention, treatment and recovery.

Above all, we need to reflect on the hope of eternal happiness which Christ brought and on our belonging to one another because we are one in him. These are the true answers, God's answers, to the hunger which desperately and hopelessly seeks to satisfy itself – or perhaps merely to anaesthetise itself – through the misuse of drugs.

Each member of the Church is meant to be a communicator of that joy and hope, not just in words but in the way we live and in the way we treat one another. We can show the pointlessness of misusing drugs if people can see that our faith gives us the meaning which alone is capable of answering the deepest longings of the human heart.

A Word to Addicts and their Families

To all who are struggling with addiction we say: do not give up hope. All things are possible with God's help. Matt Talbot and many like him are signs of hope. Family support also prompts hope and the will to struggle on. That hope is sheltered and encouraged most of all by mothers who so often continue to hope and pray when others have long given up. Even where their efforts end in death, theirs are the loving, caring and understanding hands to close their 'child addict's' eyes. Their love gives a glimpse of the love God offers to all, no matter what, now and at the hour of death.

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A Word to Drug Dealers

To drug traffickers, barons, dealers, pushers, we say: look at what you are doing. Look at the trail of lives, young lives, destroyed through drugs. Look at the families who have suffered the agony of seeing a son or daughter die for your profit. You may perhaps, now and again, recognise the horror of what you have done. No doubt you prefer not to think about it. You can be in no doubt that there are many people who are utterly disgusted by what you do.

It is never too late to change. The love and forgiveness of God is always being offered. Other people may have given up on you. God has not. A change of heart would bring you a peace that no money can buy.

A Final Word

Addiction robs people of their freedom and leaves them powerless over the habits and behaviours to which they have become captive. An addict needs to be set free, so that he or she can again become fully alive.

People in the grip of an addiction need to be awakened to hope. It is a task of the Christian community to be God's instrument in this awakening. It is a task of Christians too, individually and as a community, to bring what help they can to their sister or brother in need.

May Matt Talbot's
triumph over addiction,
bring hope to our community
and strength to our hearts,
through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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Questions which may be useful for Reflection and Discussion

Attitudes to Drugs and Alcohol

What are my own attitudes?
My children's attitudes?
My parents' attitudes?
Have I talked in my home about these ?
What is my neighbour's attitude?
What is my community's attitude?

Understanding

What can I do – as a
Parent, Friend, Community Leader, School-goer
in my home, in my school, in my parish,
in my community to
HEAR AND UNDERSTAND
more about drugs & addictions?

Drug Users

What is a Christian attitude towards people who use
drugs?
What is my attitude?
What is my community's attitude?

Recovery

How do I – my family – my community
**respect those who are in recovery from substance
abuse?**
How do we contribute to the healing?
How do these attitudes show in our legislation and
services?

**What do I need to do TODAY to advance
the discussion and the action?**

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APPENDIX

Recommended reading list:

Drugs and Young People, James Cumberston,
Ward River Press, 1982.

Co-dependent No More, Melody Beatty,
Hazeldon Foundation, 1987, second edition, 1992.

Drugs. What Parents should Know, Fr Paul Lavelle,
Veritas Publications, 1984, revised 1989.

Guidelines to Detoxification, Coolmine House,
Dublin, 1996.

Understanding Drugs: A Handbook for Parents,
Health Promotion Unit, Department of Health,
fifth edition, 1994.

The Facts about Drug Abuse in Ireland, D. Corrigan,
Health Promotion Unit, 1994.

The Agony of Ecstasy, Julian Madigan,
Poolbeg Press, 1996.