



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO A COLLOQUIUM ON CHEMICAL DEPENDENCY**

Saturday, 11 October 1997

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate and the Priesthood,

Dear Friends,

1. I am pleased to welcome you on the occasion of the international colloquium on chemical dependency. I thank Archbishop Javier Lozano Barragán, President of the *Pontifical Council for Pastoral Assistance to Health-Care Workers*, for his words of welcome and for organizing this working meeting. Indeed, it is particularly appropriate to reflect on the serious questions arising from the phenomenon of drugs and on the urgent need for research that will help political and economic leaders, teachers and families tried by the tragedy of chemical dependency.

2. For some years the Holy See has been able to express its ideas on this subject, making pastoral, educational and social proposals. *We must unfortunately note that today this phenomenon is reaching every milieu and region of the world.* More and more children and adolescents are becoming consumers of toxic substances, often because they were first tried casually or defiantly. Parents and teachers often find themselves unprepared and discouraged. Doctors, as well as health and social services, encounter serious problems when it is a question of helping those who seek their aid to escape the drug scene. It must be recognized that a crack-down on those who use illegal substances is not enough to contain this scourge; in fact, *a significant criminal network of trafficking and financing has been organized on an international scale.* Most of the time the economic power connected with the production and commercialization of these substances escapes the law and justice.

It is therefore not surprising that a great feeling of helplessness and powerlessness is overrunning society. Some are of the opinion that the production and sale of certain drugs should be legalized.

Certain authorities are prepared to do nothing, seeking merely to limit drug consumption by trying to control its effects. Consequently, in school the use of certain drugs is becoming common; this is encouraged by talk that tries to minimize the dangers, especially by distinguishing between soft and hard drugs, which leads to proposals for liberalizing the use of certain substances. This distinction disregards and downplays the risks inherent in taking any toxic product, especially *behavioural dependency*, which is based on the psychic structures themselves, *the blurring of conscience* and *the loss of one's will and freedom*, whatever the drug.

3. *The drug phenomenon is a particularly serious evil.* Many young people and adults have died or will die as a result, while others find their personal capacities diminished. Young people resort to drugs for many reasons. At critical moments in their growth, chemical dependency is to be considered symptomatic of problems in life, of difficulty in finding a place in society, of a fear of the future and of an escape into an illusory, artificial life. Youth is a time of trial and questioning, of searching for meaning in life and of making future commitments. The increased selling and consumption of drugs show that we are in *a world pressed for hope*, lacking vigorous human and spiritual prospects. Hence many young people think that all behaviour is the same, and do not differentiate between good and evil or acquire a sense of moral limits.

Nevertheless, I value the efforts of parents and teachers to *inculcate moral and spiritual values in their children*, so that they behave as responsible people. They often do this courageously, but they do not always feel supported, especially when the media spread morally unacceptable messages which serve as cultural standards in all the countries of the world, advocating for example many family models which destroy the normal image of the married couple and disparage family values, or which consider violence and sometimes drugs themselves as signs of personal liberation.

4. The fear of the future and of adult commitments which can be observed in the young makes them particularly vulnerable. Often they are not encouraged to struggle for a good, upright life; they have the tendency to withdraw into themselves. One can no longer minimize the devastating effect of unemployment to which young people fall prey in proportions unworthy of a society that wishes to respect human dignity. The forces of death then urge them to abandon themselves to drugs, to violence, sometimes even to the point of suicide. Behind what can appear as fascination with a sort of self-destruction, *we must see in these young people a call for help and a deep thirst for life*, which should be taken into account, so that the world will radically modify what it offers and its ways of life. Too many young people are left to themselves and do not benefit from an attentive presence, a stable home, normal schooling or a social and educational framework that arouses a moral and intellectual effort in them and helps them to steel their will and master their emotions.

5. *The struggle against the scourge of chemical dependency is everyone's business, each according to his own responsibility.* I first urge *husbands and wives* to develop stable conjugal and family relations, based on a love that is exclusive, lasting and faithful. They will thus create the

best conditions for a peaceful home life, offering their children *the emotional security and self-confidence they need for their spiritual and psychological growth*. It is also important that parents, who have the primary responsibility for their children, and, with them, the whole adult community, be constantly concerned about the education of youth. I therefore invite *everyone who has an educational role* to intensify their efforts with young people who need to form their conscience, develop their interior life and create positive relationships and constructive dialogue with their brothers and sisters; they will help them become free and responsible for their lives. Young people who have a structured personality, a sound moral and human formation and harmonious and trusting relationships with their peers and with adults will be more likely to resist the enticements of those who spread drugs.

6. I invite *the civil authorities, the economic decision-makers and all who have social responsibility* to continue and intensify their efforts to improve *anti-drug abuse legislation* at every level and to oppose all forms of drug culture and trafficking, sources of wealth scandalously acquired by exploiting the frailty of defenceless persons. I encourage the public authorities, parents, teachers, health-care professionals and Christian communities to be jointly and increasingly involved in *the work of prevention* among young people and adults. Wise and accurate medical information must be given especially to young people, stressing the harmful effects of drugs on the physical, intellectual, psychological, social and moral levels. I am aware of *the tireless devotion and patience of those who care for and attend to persons ensnared in drugs, and their families*. I invite the parents whose child has a chemical dependency never to despair, to stay in communication with him, to show him their affection and to encourage his contacts with structures that can care for him. A family's warm attention is a great support for the interior struggle and for the progress of detoxification.

7. I salute *the tireless and patient pastoral commitment of priests, religious and lay persons* in the world of drugs; they support parents and are keen to welcome and listen to young people, to understand their radical questions in order to help them escape the spiral of drugs and become free and happy adults. *The Church's mission is to transmit the word of the Gospel that opens us to God's life and enables us to discover Christ, the Word of Life who offers a path of human and spiritual growth*. Following the example of her Lord and in solidarity with her brothers and sisters in humanity, the Church comes to the aid of the lowliest and the weakest, caring for those who are wounded, fortifying those who are sick, seeking the personal growth of each one.

At the end of our meeting, I salute the mission undertaken by *the Pontifical Council for Pastoral Assistance to Health-Care Workers* in carefully following the human and spiritual problems posed by drug dependency and by all health-care and social issues, in order to offer solutions for situations that are gravely harmful to men and women, our brothers and sisters. Likewise, in conjunction with the Pastors of the particular Churches, with the faithful and the competent services involved in supporting those with a chemical dependency and their families, the Council is called to offer its support to local initiatives.

I entrust you and your activity to the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary; I also beseech her for the young people who are in the grip of drugs, and for their loved ones. May she surround them with her motherly concern! May she guide the world's young people to an ever more harmonious life! May the Holy Spirit go with you and give you the necessary courage for your work on behalf of youth! I impart my Apostolic Blessing to you all, to your collaborators and to the members of your families.

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