

Pontiff Commends Alcoholism Programs

Vatican City (RNS) — Pope Paul, in an address to members of the Calix Society, an international Roman Catholic organization for recovering alcoholics, warmly commended persons who have recourse to a "higher power" in overcoming alcoholism.

In the context, the pontiff's remarks were seen as expressing approval for Alcoholics Anonymous.

The term "higher power" is a term constantly used in AA circles, referring to the AA's insistence, as expressed in Step 2 of the organization's suggested "Twelve Steps" of recovery from alcoholism: "(We) came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity."

The Calix Society, with headquarters in St. Paul, Minneapolis, though not affiliated with AA, subscribes to its ideology. Most of its members are also members of AA. Calix focuses on the spiritual rehabilitation and growth of its (mostly) Catholic members with the aids of the sacramental life of the Church, but generally presupposes adherence to the AA program of recovery.

Pope Paul received the Calix members at a special audience on May 11. The group was on pilgrimage to Rome to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the founding of the organization. The pontiff told the group that he was "deeply aware" of the "gravity" of the problem of alcoholism and "alcoholic abuse."

The Pope noted the complexity of the problem: "To be properly confronted, alcoholic abuse, and

in particular alcoholism, must be understood with all their various implications — physical,

psychological, moral, and religious. Rehabilitation must take all these factors into consideration."

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THE CHURCH 1974

Father Andrew Greeley

Apparently, a committee has been set up to preside over American Catholicism's contribution to the nation's bicentennial. It seems that part of the concern of the committee is the concern of the committee is justice and peace — a laudable enough concern — a laudable enough concern — a laudable enough concern.

Having had my share of experience with ritualistic episcopal committees, I may perhaps be pardoned for being skeptical that anything more than ritual is intended. Some pious statements will doubtless be issued against injustice and war; pep rallies will be held around the country to inveigh against these twin evils — in the "third world" rhetoric which passes for serious social and economic analysis in Catholic circles today.

Without having been asked for my opinion, I'd like to suggest a more appropriate present from the American Catholic Church to the Republic on its bicentenary. We might just present the country with self-understanding.

Since the disastrous Americanism controversy shut off original Catholic thinking in the United States almost eight decades ago, American Catholics have taken their intellectual leadership from abroad — from Italy and England before the Second World War, and thereafter in rapid succession from France, Germany and Holland. Now, as the ultimate in self-hatred, we are turning to Latin America for a "liberation theology" which is supposed to be pertinent to our religious problems and needs.

Maybe the bishops and their technical experts could go back to where we were in 1895 and ask if there is anything in the American Catholic experience that we might share with the rest of the country and the rest of the world. Can we reflect upon, if not theologize about, our own experience in such a way as to illumine problems of justice and peace?

The alternative is to repeat the clichés of the liberal left, or the mindless simplicism of the third world crew, or the hollow enthusiasms of our own weary social actionists, or the pontifical

wisdom of the Protestant divines who, at their national meetings, lay out in an endless series of resolutions, answers to all the problems of the human race.

It is indicative of our problem that whenever I say "reflect on the meaning of the American Catholic experience," people look at me like old weird Greeley has flipped once again. How could there be anything in our experience worth reflecting upon?

We have come a long way since John Ireland

Briefly, the genius of American politics has been pluralism and the genius of American Catholicism has also been pluralism. American politics is based upon coalition-building and localism — on winning allies for your group from other groups at the grass roots (as Madison made clear in the "Federalist Papers"). In urban politics, the local coalitions are built in the precinct. And the religious side of the precinct is the parish. The precinct and the parish together constitute that American Catholic phenomenon, the neighborhood.

Theologize about the neighborhood? What can possibly be remarkable about the neighborhood?

The trouble is, having been raised in neighborhoods we take them for granted, we don't realize what an absolutely unique phenomenon they are in modern urban life. So we turn to the French, or the Dutch, or heaven save us, the Latins to learn about building community, ignoring the remarkable community in our midst.

But what can coalitions, precincts, parishes, neighborhoods say about justice and peace?

Coalition politics — neighborhood building, if you will — is about binding people together, about harmonizing conflicting interests, about devising compromises which everyone can live with. It is, in other words, about reconciliation.

Which is why I thought Jesus came into the world.

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