

**Respect
LIFE**

ADDICTIONS:

Fast Becoming the Bane of Society

By WILLIAM RYAN

My college-bound daughter recently returned from a get-acquainted visit to a well-known Catholic women's college on the East Coast. She found the classes interesting, the students warm and friendly, the faculty responsive and helpful. But one disquieting observation seemed somehow to outweigh the positive impressions. Time and again the subject of alcohol turned up in campus conversations. There were numerous allusions to bars that had been visited and bars yet to be seen; there was even a bar on campus. It wasn't the drinking that troubled her, for she saw none. The truly disquieting thing was the eagerness for and apparent preoccupation with the topic.

This is not to say that this particular college has a drinking problem on its hands, for I have no concrete information on which to base such a judgment. It is reasonable, however, to be concerned about the potential for it, and there is ample testimony to the fact that alcohol abuse is a problem on many college campuses, both large and small. The problem is not an altogether new one, of course, and historians tell us that over-indulgence in alcohol was a widespread phenomenon even in colonial America. In many respects we have moved forward since colonial days. In the matter of misuse of alcohol, and substance abuse generally, the direction seems to be the reverse. Still, colleges are merely mirroring what is true of society as a whole. By and large, it seems as though almost everyone today is hooked on something.

"Today, the wound of addiction cuts deeper in its form and its manner than most could have dreamed," said Pope John Paul II in a 1984 address to the Eighth World Conference of Therapeutic Communities.

The statistics bear this out. Alcohol is second only to cancer as the leading killer in the United States. It is involved in between 60-80 percent of all child-abuse cases, teenage highway fatalities, murders, drownings and fire deaths. One out of every eight adults is an alcoholic. Thirty-one percent of high school students are considered alcohol misusers.

The President's Commission on Organized Crime reported in March 1986 that it had found an overall dangerous increase in the amount of drugs used, deaths from overdoses, simultaneous use of dangerous drugs and their usage by middle class Americans. The commission found marijuana use "firmly entrenched in American society." It also reported a new phenomenon: middle class heroin users — addicts and non-addicts — who began to use the drug because of their dependency on cocaine.

According to Rev. Terry Attridge, head of the New York Archdiocese's drug program, "the target in the 1980s is children and young people ages 6 to 16. One of the drug industry's top operators says this was an industry decision." Father Attridge says substance abuse, particularly of alcohol is "an equal opportunity destroyer. It crosses all socioeconomic lines, and doesn't discriminate in terms of age, race, religion, occupation or sex."

"Every person knows a substance abuser," Father Attridge says. "It might be your best friends' spouse, the elderly lady next door, your parish priest, the teen down the street, your child's teacher, your boss. It might be the best-kept secret in the world, but, as we've learned the hard way, some secrets kill."

Why do people drink too much or otherwise overindulge? Dr. James Kenny, a psychologist, says that the answer is in some ways deceptively



(Photo by Jim Whitmer)

DRUGS ON CAMPUS is becoming an increasingly worrisome problem since the availability of "recreational" drugs has received widespread public attention. Top operators in the drug industry admit that young people aged 6 to 16 have been targeted as prime customers.

simple: "It feels good, and we are dishonest if we pretend otherwise." Where kids are concerned, he points to other reasons: curiosity, peer pressure, rebellion, the desire to fit into a certain subculture "and the fact that some of us are set up chemically, a physiological addiction which is in good part hereditary, which makes a person an alcoholic."

Dr. Kenny also added a jarring note for his co-religionists: "More than any other religious group, Catholics have problems with alcohol, and are the most likely to become addicted. This is a blunt statistical fact." The doctor believes this is because Catholics often grow up being told that alcohol is all right for adults but wrong for them. This tends to foster extremism rather than moderation. Moreover, according to Dr. Kenny, "research makes clear that alcoholics generally come from two types of homes, those where alcohol was abused and those where it was forbidden. Learning how to drink moderately and maturely while growing up in the home is one good way to prevent alcoholism."

Like most experts, Kay Windsor, Respect Life coordinator for the Diocese of Youngstown, Ohio, cites peer pressure as a major component of the problem. Windsor, who underwent special training to work in substance abuse prevention programs,

cites the example of one Ohio community that recently learned that 89 percent of all children in grades six through 12 were drinking some form of alcohol. Windsor believes substance abuse is one of the principal Respect Life issues confronting us today. It has been her experience that many young people who are suicidal or who have abortions are substance abusers or come from substance abuse families, and that this is also true of many of the youths who make drugs available to others.

"Why are young people so vulnerable?" Father Attridge asks. "Some young people become involved simply through a need to be accepted, to be a part of the group, and they become the reluctant users and, in time, the abusers. Other young people say, 'I can't deal with what is happening to me or with what I have done,' so they block it out by getting high. They take flight. Alcohol and other drugs become their escape from reality. They succumb to the temptation to be irresponsible, free from responsibility, not hoodlums or evil persons, but persons in almost-adult frames who are immature, frightened and very insecure."

"Within the growing subculture of alcohol and other drug abuse, the needs are not crystal clear," Father Attridge continues. "They are hidden in the damaged psyches of people programmed by society to look good on the outside, to cover the needle marks, walk straight, hide the problems. They are victims in need of immediate attention and the most intensive care. They are an endangered community, and the majority of them are young people."

Yet recognizing the problem is not as simple as it sounds, and, in fact, seems to go against the grain. As Stephen P. Athorp laments in *Alcohol and Substance Abuse: A Clergy Handbook*, "Though organized religion has direct contact with over half the families in America, it is apparent that one of the country's most alarming and growing problems is being ignored by churches and synagogues, laity and clergy alike." Athorp notes that in 1982 the Churchmen's League in Massachusetts asked clergy and laity to select the 10 issues they considered the most important. Alcohol abuse was listed as the number one concern, with 71 percent of the votes, nuclear war was second with 69 percent and drug abuse was third, with 60 percent. Two years earlier, delegates to the White House Conference on Families had listed, to the surprise of many, "new efforts to prevent alcohol and drug abuse" as their number one recommendation. The vote was nearly unanimous — 92.7 percent of the delegates considered it to be the most important issue facing America today.

A number of Church programs in education, training and treatment are beginning to spring up around the country. But there is one thing many of us could do to help with the substance abuse problem. We could stop being part of it.

All efforts to combat the problem will probably be unsuccessful — or less successful than they might be — if prayer is forgotten.

"The secret of eradicating the poison of drug addiction is to cultivate intensely spiritual values," Pope John Paul says.

"Some people may resist looking for answers down spiritual channels," Father Attridge adds, "But this is a mistake because the roots of unhappiness ultimately do have spiritual underpinnings," he continues. "Our hope lies not in our ability to save ourselves, but in the power of God to bring life out of death, hope where there is despair."

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