

Drug war

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youths are attracted by the easy money to be made selling drugs.

Father Marquis' contentions were echoed by William Sullivan, professor of religious studies at St. John Fisher College and president of Rochester's Edgerton Area Neighborhood Association.

Noting that his opinions don't reflect those of his fellow association members, Sullivan maintained that legalizing drugs would help stem the drug trade by eliminating its economic incentive.

"Job opportunities for the poor are minimum-wage jobs that won't permit them to support their families, (as opposed to) ... outrageously high-(paying) opportunities for dealing with drugs," he said. Sullivan added that suburban drug users, unlike their closely policed urban counterparts, are often spared the consequences of their actions by the criminal-justice system.

The Rev. Raymond Graves, president of Rochester's United Church Ministry, Inc., disagreed with Sullivan's views, asserting that most minorities would as well. "I don't think (legalization) would take the profit motive out of it," he said. "You'd still have illegal operations."

Graves also criticized law enforcement's anti-drug efforts, saying that police searches in the inner city and "sweeps" of houses in drug-trafficking areas have alienated law-abiding residents. "I've seen people who've been abused because of some of these raids who never had guns, and now they have guns in their homes,"

he said.

"(Police) focus on the inner city," he continued. "Why not go after the folks who bring the stuff into the country?"

Stopping the "stuff" is the job of the federal Drug Enforcement Administration, which has been criticized by spokesmen from groups both for and against legalization as a bottomless hole into which the nation's tax revenues descend when they would be better spent on education and treatment.

Such criticisms ignore the facts, DEA public-affairs officer Bill Ruzzamenti said in a phone interview with the *Catholic Courier*. The spokesman acknowledged that 71 percent of the Bush administration's anti-drug monies goes to enforcement while 29 percent goes to cutting demand for drugs, but he added that the DEA, at least, pays its own way.

Of \$9 billion earmarked for the drug war's first year, \$548 million went to the DEA. Last year alone, however, the agency seized almost \$1 billion in assets confiscated from convicted drug dealers. Hence, Ruzzamenti said, the DEA actually makes money for the government.

Ruzzamenti argued that illegal drug use and drug trafficking have declined significantly during the last decade, making the oft-ridiculed drug war a success story. Illegal drug use is most prevalent among people 25-35 years old, he said, implying that support for drug legalization tends to come from a segment of society that is on the fringe.

"The whole thing of the legalization question is ludicrous," he said, citing survey results indicating that 80-90 percent

of all Americans oppose drug legalization. "It's a moot point," Ruzzamenti said, observing that in many states, drug laws are actually becoming more restrictive.

But is turning drug users into criminals an enlightened approach to the problem of addiction? Not if you ask Clare Regan, a drug-legalization advocate and editor of Rochester's Judicial Process Commission newsletter.

Labeling current drug laws as "hypocritical" because tobacco and alcohol remain legal, Regan argued that penalizing addicts makes a moral issue out of a medical problem. She said that cocaine addiction buttresses her point since addicts who want to stop using the drug often find it impossible without receiving adequate medical treatment.

Cocaine, the drug scourge of the last decade, did not always so occupy the public mind. In the late 1960s and early '70s, marijuana was the preferred high of many illegal-drug users. Although its popularity has declined significantly, marijuana is still used by millions of Americans, and even the U.S. government has acknowledged it as the nation's leading cash crop.

Don Fiedler, director of the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws, said that keeping marijuana illegal only encourages its users to try other more dangerous drugs like cocaine. Currently, pot smokers often buy the drug from the same people who deal crack and cocaine, Fiedler told the *Courier* in a telephone interview from Washington, D.C. Legalizing marijuana would create a safe, separate, adult market for the drug — a market that could be regulated and taxed by

state governments, he said.

Fiedler's idea is practiced on a de facto basis in the Netherlands, where drugs are still technically illegal, but where drug users are not punished. The government allows marijuana to be sold in small amounts at hundreds of coffee shops throughout the country, while authorities concentrate their efforts on stopping the trafficking of such "hard" drugs as cocaine and heroin.

Fiedler's hypothesis that legalizing marijuana would separate its distribution from the hard-drug market proved true in the Netherlands, according to Dr. Frits Ruter, a professor at the University of Amsterdam who testified on his country's drug policy before the U.S. Congress in 1988.

"This policy was successful: the markets were separated and the overwhelming majority of marijuana users did not graduate to hard drugs," the professor said, according to a report from the Dutch embassy in Washington. "And this policy had another positive result," he added. "The number of new users has decreased shortly after the government decided on the decriminalization of cannabis (marijuana) in 1976 ..."

Whether drug legalization is the answer to America's drug problem, renewed debate has at least focused attention on the drug issue, said Carl Hatch, director of the Catholic Family Center's RESTART Substance Abuse Services.

"Our opinion is that the community really needs to wrestle with this issue," he said, confessing he is ambivalent about legalization. "Clearly, the direction that we have been going in hasn't worked."

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