

International Seminar on “The Catholic Church and the Issue of Smoking Harm Reduction”

Wednesday, May 25, 2022

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“Understanding the Common Good: Reflections on Smoking Harm Reduction”

Dear Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen....

The International Seminar on the theme: “The Catholic Church and the Issue of Smoking Harm Reduction,” puts us before one of the greatest tragedies afflicting society today, in addition to global warming, social and health crises, political and economic crises, and the illicit trafficking and abuse of drug abuse. Tobacco, like drugs and alcohol, constitutes a challenge to all those who are interested in the defence of life as well as the promotion of both human dignity and integral human development.

Health: A Common Good

First and foremost, the principle of the common good is founded on the dignity, unity, and equality of all persons, “to which every aspect of social life must be related if it is to attain its fullest meaning.”¹ In an initial broad sense, the Catholic Church understands the *common good* as: “the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfilment.”² In this sense, “The common good does not consist in the simple sum of the particular goods of each subject of a social entity. Belonging to everyone and to each person, it is and remains “common”, because it is indivisible and because only together is it possible to attain it, increase it and safeguard its effectiveness, with regard also to the future.”³

It follows from this assertion that “the demands of the common good are dependent on the social conditions of each historical period and are strictly connected to respect for and the integral promotion of the person and his fundamental rights.”⁴ And one of the fundamental rights of the human person is health. This is made evident in the *Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights*, in Article 14: “The promotion of health and social development for their people is a central purpose of governments that all sectors of society share. Taking into account that the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic or social condition, progress in science and technology should advance: access to quality health care and essential medicines, especially for the

¹ Cf. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 164.

² Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Past. Const. *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 26.

³ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 164.

⁴ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 166; cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1907.

health of women and children, because health is essential to life itself and must be considered to be a social and human good.”⁵

Tobacco Use is a Tragedy for Health, and thus for the Common Good

The World Health Organisation (WHO), by instituting the World No Tobacco Day in 1987, committed itself to raising awareness and understanding of the tobacco epidemic and its deadly effects around the world. The health consequences of tobacco use show that tobacco use is responsible for more than 8 million deaths each year, killing about one in two users. Over 7 million of these deaths are due to direct consumption of tobacco products, and about 1.2 million are due to second-hand smoking. Most tobacco deaths currently occur in low- and middle-income countries, which are the target of intense marketing efforts and campaigns by the tobacco industry. Tobacco use thus becomes the second leading cause of death worldwide. Consequently, tobacco use raises unavoidable ethical and moral issues.⁶

According to the World Health Organisation, this reality is overwhelming, when we note, for example, that in 2004, children accounted for 28% of deaths attributable to passive smoking. More than 40% of children have at least one parent who smokes, and almost half of children regularly breathe air polluted by tobacco smoke in public places.⁷ This is a danger to environmental ecology on the one hand and a threat to the ecology of everyday life and health on the other. According to Pope Francis, “the setting[s] in which people live their lives [...] influence the way we think, feel and act. In our rooms, our homes, our workplaces and neighbourhoods, we use our environment as a way of expressing our identity. We make every effort to adapt to our environment, but when it is disorderly, chaotic or saturated with noise and ugliness,”⁸ quality of life and health are compromised.

Green Tobacco Sickness

It seems surprising that tobacco also causes diseases that are not directly related to the smoke: “Green Tobacco Sickness.” This is a dramatic reality that often escapes the general public, as it directly affects the people who work in tobacco cultivation, and especially the most vulnerable of workers: children. “The amount of nicotine in tobacco is so high that when the leaves are wet, the people who harvest them can be exposed to massive doses of nicotine, equivalent to the consumption of about 50 cigarettes in a few hours, which can cause dizziness, vomiting, headaches, and muscle weakness. This ‘green tobacco sickness’ is particularly threatening to children employed in some countries as labourers to harvest tobacco for U.S. multinationals, with disastrous consequences for their physical and mental development.”⁹

As a result, the challenge posed by the issue of smoking, especially the use of cigarettes, remains the relentless work of the tobacco industry to make smokers as addicted as possible.¹⁰ This

⁵ *Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights*, 2005, Art. 14, §1-2a.

⁶ Cf. Pontifical Council for Pastoral Assistance to Health Care Workers, *New Charter for Health Care Workers*, n. 127.

⁷ Cf. <https://www.education.gouv.fr/journee-mondiale-sans-tabac-9365>

⁸ Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter on the Care for our Common Home *Laudato Si'*, no. 147.

⁹ Richard Beliveau and Denis Gingras, *Prévenir le Cancer. Comment réduire les risques*. Trécarré: Québec (2014), p. 41. Unofficial translation into English by J. Paparella.

¹⁰ Cf. Richard Beliveau and Denis Gingras, *Prévenir le Cancer. Comment réduire les risques*. Trécarré: Québec (2014), p. 49.

documented finding “clearly shows that the industry has gone to great lengths to increase the quality of nicotine that is inhaled by smokers, with the express goal of increasing their dependence on cigarettes. For example, U.S. cigarette companies add up to 616 chemicals to tobacco, some of which are intended to make the smoke more tolerable, while others are specifically designed to increase the intake of nicotine and facilitate its absorption.”¹¹ It must be acknowledged that these chemical manipulations have certainly had an impact on the toxicity of cigarette smoke, because between 1968 and 1985, the concentrations of certain carcinogens increased considerably.¹²

Tobacco addiction means that both ‘active’ and ‘passive’ smokers are repeatedly exposed to many of the carcinogenic molecules in cigarette smoke, which contains at least 3,500 separate compounds, many of which contribute to lung cancers.¹³ Several other organs are exposed to tobacco carcinogens, and at least sixteen distinct types of cancer are associated with smoking.¹⁴

Tobacco Use and COVID-19

Smoking is also known to be a risk factor for many respiratory infections and it significantly worsens cardio-respiratory disease. One in five deaths from heart disease is linked to smoking.¹⁵ For this reason, the WHO gathered public health experts on April 29, 2020 to review studies which concluded that smokers are more likely to contract a severe form of COVID-19 than non-smokers. According to these experts, since COVID-19 is an infectious disease that primarily affects the lungs, cigarette smoke further weakens lung function, making the body less resistant to the Coronavirus and other pathogens. Smoking is also an important risk factor for serious non-communicable diseases, which exhibit higher death rates among smokers.¹⁶

Tobacco: A Threat to Environmental Ecology

Ladies and Gentlemen, even though the total number of tobacco users in the world has decreased by about 60 million over the last two decades, from 1.397 billion in 2000 to 1.337 billion in 2018, according to the WHO,¹⁷ we must not let our guard down. Given the current number of smokers in the world, smoking will always remain a threat to the environment and to health. This is highlighted by the theme of the WHO’s the campaign for this year 2022: “Tobacco: Threat to our environment.” From cultivation, through production, distribution, use and waste, the tobacco life cycle is a highly polluting and damaging process.

Worldwide, approximately 3.5 million hectares of land are destroyed each year to grow tobacco. At this rate, tobacco cultivation contributes to the deforestation of 200,000 hectares per year

¹¹ Richard Beliveau and Denis Gingras, *Prévenir le Cancer. Comment réduire les risques*. Trécarré: Québec (2014), p. 49. Unofficial translation into English by J. Paparella.

¹² Cf. Richard Beliveau and Denis Gingras, *Prévenir le Cancer. Comment réduire les risques*. Trécarré: Québec (2014), p. 49-50.

¹³ Cf. Richard Beliveau and Denis Gingras, *Prévenir le Cancer. Comment réduire les risques*. Trécarré: Québec (2014), p. 53.

¹⁴ Cf. <https://www.quebecsanstabac.ca/je-minforme/dangers-sante/tabac-cancers>

¹⁵ Cf. <https://www.who.int/fr/news/item/22-09-2020-tobacco-responsible-for-20-of-deaths-from-coronary-heart-disease>

¹⁶ Cf. <https://www.who.int/fr/news/item/11-05-2020-who-statement-tobacco-use-and-covid-19>

¹⁷ Cf. <https://www.who.int/fr/news/item/19-12-2019-who-launches-new-report-on-global-tobacco-use-trends>

and the degradation of soil and biodiversity.¹⁸ Nicotine is present in large quantities in the leaves of the tobacco plant, from where it can even evaporate and spread to other nearby plants, eliminating nearby insects. Tobacco production depletes the planet of water, fossil fuels, and metals.¹⁹ The tobacco plant also has the curious property of incorporating into its leaves Polonium-210, a radioactive isotope formed by the decomposition of uranium in the earth's crust. Though present in minute quantities, this Polonium-210 isotope is absorbed with each puff of a cigarette and gradually accumulates in the respiratory tract.²⁰

In addition to the air pollution caused by smoking, other damage is caused throughout the supply chain. With the globalisation of the market, the tobacco industries rely heavily on resource-intensive modes of transport. Every year, 4.5 billion cigarette butts worldwide are not properly disposed of, generating 1.69 billion pounds of toxic waste and releasing thousands of chemicals into the air, water, and soil.²¹

This environmental tragedy is well illustrated in Pope Francis' Encyclical *Laudato Si'*: "Some forms of pollution are part of people's daily experience. Exposure to atmospheric pollutants produces a broad spectrum of health hazards, especially for the poor, and causes millions of premature deaths. People take sick, for example, from breathing high levels of smoke from fuels used in cooking or heating. There is also pollution that affects everyone, caused by transport, industrial fumes, substances which contribute to the acidification of soil and water, fertilizers, insecticides, fungicides, herbicides and agrottoxins in general. [...] Account must also be taken of the pollution produced by residue, including dangerous waste present in different areas. Each year hundreds of millions of tons of waste are generated, much of it non-biodegradable, highly toxic and radioactive, from homes and businesses, from construction and demolition sites, from clinical, electronic and industrial sources. The earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth."²²

The Fight against Tobacco Use

With the growing awareness of the health and environmental damage caused by tobacco, stronger and more convergent public policies are needed in the fight against tobacco. As Pope Francis stated with regards to issues that violate fundamental human rights, before "the magnitude of these situations, and their toll in innocent lives [...] we must avoid every temptation to fall into a declarationist nominalism that would assuage our consciences. We need to ensure that our institutions are truly effective in the struggle against all these scourges. This includes taking intelligent advantage of the immense resources offered by technological development."²³

In this light, taxation and criminal justice, which are the levers of public policy, when faced with the challenges posed by the issue of addictions in general, must bring together the control of

¹⁸ Cf. <https://www.euro.who.int/en/media-centre/events/events/2022/05/world-no-tobacco-day-2022-tobaccos-threat-to-our-environment>

¹⁹ Cf. <https://www.euro.who.int/en/media-centre/events/events/2022/05/world-no-tobacco-day-2022-tobaccos-threat-to-our-environment>

²⁰ Cf. Richard Beliveau and Denis Gingras, *Prévenir le Cancer. Comment réduire les risques*. Trécarré: Québec (2014), p. 53.

²¹ Cf. <https://www.euro.who.int/en/media-centre/events/events/2022/05/world-no-tobacco-day-2022-tobaccos-threat-to-our-environment>

²² Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter on the Care for our Common Home *Laudato Si'*, nos. 20-21.

²³ Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter on Fraternity and Social Friendship *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 188.

both production and consumption in the fight against tobacco use. If governments or states have authority over the entire cigarette manufacturing and distribution circuit – insofar as they are entitled to regulate the production, advertising, marketing, and sale of tobacco products – they can prohibit, for example, the use of certain carcinogenic chemicals. This would allow for the imposition of significant restrictive measures on the tobacco industry and consumers.²⁴ With this in mind, policymakers must strengthen legislation, including by implementing existing programmes, and make producers equally responsible for the environmental and economic costs of tobacco waste treatment and for the health care of patients with tobacco-related illnesses.

The Principle of Reducing Risk and Damages: The Electronic Cigarette

Ladies and Gentlemen, for health professionals dealing with the ravages of tobacco, the arrival on the market of electronic cigarettes is a “lesser evil,” even if there is not yet a consensus on its use. According to health professionals, the use of electronic cigarettes is a valuable harm reduction strategy for smoking, as an approach that focuses much more on health consequences than on behaviour. Studies have also shown that the use of electronic cigarettes increases the success rate of quitting smoking by 60%, suggesting that these products are not only alternatives to smoking but could be interesting tools for stopping tobacco use. In this sense, electronic cigarettes could add a new dimension to the fight against smoking.²⁵ From an ecological point of view, they also help to reduce the amount of waste from cigarette butts.

However, recent studies have indicated that e-cigarette vapour also contains high levels of nanoparticles that stimulate inflammation and increase the risk of asthma, heart disease, and diabetes. Therefore, there is an urgent need for its use and promotion to be strictly regulated by the relevant authorities, especially among young people, in order to reduce their exposure to this potentially toxic substance as much as possible.²⁶

Nowadays, with various methods available for quitting smoking, the vast majority of people who stop smoking do so on their own, without pharmacological or psychological help.²⁷ Nicotine substitutes or medication can be useful, as they increase the success rate of withdrawal by about 50%, but there is nothing miraculous about them: it is the will and motivation to quit that remain the main factors in the success of stopping to smoke.²⁸ And given the highly addictive nature of nicotine, the only way to truly reduce smoking in the long-term is to prevent new customers, especially young people and adolescents, from experiencing the taste of tobacco,²⁹ through education in “human ecology and integral health.”

²⁴ Cf. <https://www.cairn.info/traite-d-addictologie--9782257206503-page-206.htm>

²⁵ Cf. Richard Beliveau and Denis Gingras, *Prévenir le Cancer. Comment réduire les risques*. Trécarré: Québec (2014), p. 57.

²⁶ Cf. Richard Beliveau and Denis Gingras, *Prévenir le Cancer. Comment réduire les risques*. Trécarré: Québec (2014), p. 57.

²⁷ Cf. Richard Beliveau and Denis Gingras, *Prévenir le Cancer. Comment réduire les risques*. Trécarré: Québec (2014), p. 55.

²⁸ Cf. Richard Beliveau and Denis Gingras, *Prévenir le Cancer. Comment réduire les risques*. Trécarré: Québec (2014), p. 55.

²⁹ Cf. Richard Beliveau and Denis Gingras, *Prévenir le Cancer. Comment réduire les risques*. Trécarré: Québec (2014), p. 55.

The Role of Education in Tobacco Use

“Human ecology also implies another profound reality: the relationship between human life and the moral law, which is inscribed in our nature and is necessary for the creation of a more dignified environment.”³⁰ Created in the image and likeness of God (*Gen.* 1:26-27), human beings have a dignified nature which they must respect and which they cannot manipulate at will, nor expose to health risks through addictive behaviour.

In order to achieve this objective, as the motivations for addictions, in general, are indicative of social factors, a fight against the overall social causes of tobacco use is necessary. The political, social, and economic issues related to tobacco also must be taken into consideration. For, in order to be truly effective, a policy of prevention and the management of risks and damage must involve the social body as a whole (governments, families, schools, associations, etc.), and produce a discourse on addictions that is in line with the experiences of individuals and the broader societal context.³¹

Pope Francis expresses this as follows: “The Church, together with local, national and international institutions, and various educational agencies, is concretely engaged in every part of the world in combating the spread of addictions, devoting her resources to prevention, care, rehabilitation and reinsertion, in order to restore dignity to those who have lost it. Fighting addictions calls for a combined effort on the part of various local groups and agencies in enacting social programmes promoting health care, family support and especially education.”³²

Awareness of the seriousness of the problems associated with the phenomenon of smoking must be translated into new ethical and moral habits in order to offer young people incentives and concrete educational programmes to develop their potential and to educate them in the joy finding fulfilment in what is deep and not merely ephemeral in life. According to Pope Francis, Christian spirituality proposes another way of understanding the quality of life, encouraging a sober, prophetic, and contemplative lifestyle, which is capable of helping to appreciate things deeply without being obsessed by consumption.³³

It is clear, the Pope tells us, that “such sobriety, when lived freely and consciously, is liberating.”³⁴ Young people and teenagers can learn that “even living on little, they can live a lot, above all when they cultivate other pleasures and find satisfaction in fraternal encounters, in service, in developing their gifts, in music and art, in contact with nature, in prayer. Happiness means knowing how to limit some needs which only diminish us, and being open to the many different possibilities which life can offer.”³⁵

³⁰ Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter on the Care for our Common Home *Laudato Si'*, no. 155.

³¹ Cf. <https://www.cairn.info/traite-d-addictologie--9782257206503-page-241.htm#:~:text=Les%20%C3%A9tudes%20men%C3%A9es%20en%20population,impact%20sur%20les%20conduites%20addictives>

³² Pope Francis, *Address to Participants in the International Conference on “Drugs and Addictions: An Obstacle to Integral Human Development”* (December 1, 2018).

³³ Cf. Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter on the Care for our Common Home *Laudato Si'*, no. 222.

³⁴ Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter on the Care for our Common Home *Laudato Si'*, no. 223.

³⁵ Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter on the Care for our Common Home *Laudato Si'*, no. 223.

The Courage to Hope

To create environments that prevent new customers from experimenting with tobacco, and that encourage active smokers to quit, all partners must work together in implementing tobacco control measures that effectively reduce the demand for tobacco. Governments or states must ensure that their citizens have easy access to assistance in quitting smoking, such as free telephone helplines, mobile and digital quitting services, nicotine replacement products, and other proven tools to help people quit smoking.³⁶ These initiatives help improve health, save lives, protect the environment from cigarette butt pollution, and save money. It is also time for the tobacco industry to take responsibility for the millions of people it is killing every year.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the challenges facing tobacco are enormous, but together we are moving forward with renewed commitment without losing hope. As Pope Francis has said: “Certainly, hope has to be realistic. It demands acknowledging the many troubling issues confronting our world and the challenges lurking on the horizon. It requires that problems be called by their name and the courage be found to resolve them. [...] Precisely in light of these situations, we cannot give up hope. And hope requires courage. It means acknowledging that evil, suffering and death will not have the last word, and that even the most complex questions can and must be faced and resolved. For hope is the virtue that inspires us and keeps us moving forward, even when obstacles seem insurmountable.”³⁷

I thank you for your kind attention!

³⁶ Cf. <https://www.who.int/fr/news/item/08-12-2020-who-launches-year-long-campaign-to-help-100-million-people-quit-tobacco>

³⁷ Pope Francis, *Address to the Members of the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See for the Traditional Exchange of New Year Greetings* (January 9, 2020).