



DICASTERY FOR PROMOTING
INTEGRAL HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Message of H.E. Cardinal Peter K.A. Turkson
Prefect of the Dicastery for the Promoting Integral Human Development
on the occasion of the International Day against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking
26 June 2021

Theme 2021: “Share Facts on Drugs, Save Lives”

The production and consumption of narcotics or drugs are not recent phenomena. Among the perils that, today, threaten humanity as a whole and young people in particular, drugs represent a danger that is even more insidious because it is less visible.

Over the past 20 years, drug use has increased much faster in low- and middle-income countries than in high-income countries. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), on the international level, despite the actions and measures taken, the production and use of drugs is increasing, in terms of both overall figures and the proportion of the world's population that uses them. Indeed, in 2009, the number of drug users was estimated at 210 million, or 4.8% of the world's population aged between 15 and 64, compared to 269 million, or 5.3% of the population, in 2018. The decriminalization and legalization of drugs in some countries further complicates the phenomenon. The number of inhalation spaces in consumption rooms and supervised injection sites has also increased in some countries.

With globalization, the drug market has become increasingly complex. In addition to plant-based substances such as cannabis, cocaine, and heroin, there are now hundreds of synthetic drugs, many of which are not under international control. Moreover, the non-medical use of certain medicines has rapidly increased. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reported that every year nearly 500 new psychoactive substances (PSN) are found on the national markets of

Member States. There are also the drugs of the poor (for example, coca) used to overcome fatigue and hunger.

Drugs offer the mirage of an escape from adversity and stress, but they only make the problems worse. For people struggling with their consumption, they are both the fruit and the cause of significant distress and a growing degradation of social life, which corrode the very fabric of dignity, interpersonal relationships, and civilized community life.¹ This situation engages all the actors involved in the defence and promotion of human dignity and integral human development. We indeed are all faced with a vast phenomenon of terrible proportions, not only because of the number of lives shattered but also because of the spread of the moral and ethical problem which, for a long time, has also affected the youngest in countries less favoured by technical development, where vulnerable people such as children are unfortunately led to become drug distributors and users themselves.²

This year's theme challenges us: "Share Facts on Drugs, Save Lives." We must share accurate medical information: it highlights the pernicious effects of drug use at the somatic, psychological, social, and moral levels.³

The thought of St. John Paul II corroborates this assertion, when he stated: "Psychologists and sociologists believe that the first cause that drives young people and adults to the fatal experience of drugs is the absence of clear and convincing motivations in life. Indeed, the absence of reference points, the lack of values, the conviction that nothing makes sense, and that living is, therefore, not worthwhile, the tragic and distressing feeling of being people who walk, unknown in an absurd universe, may call some to look for an exasperated and desperate escape. Psychology experts also say that the cause of the drug phenomenon is the feeling of loneliness and incommunicability that unfortunately weighs on the entire modern, noisy, and anonymous society, and even on the family."⁴

The drug phenomenon is, indeed, a matter of great concern throughout the world, which requires serious study and the involvement of all actors in society. It is a wound inflicted on humanity that imprisons many people in a spiral of suffering and alienation and in the face of which the Church

¹ Cf. Pontifical Council for Health Pastoral Care (2001). *Church: Drugs and Drug Addiction. Pastoral Handbook*, LEV, n. 34.

² Saint John Paul II, *To the participants in the VI International Conference of the Pontifical Council for the Health Care Workers*, 23 Nov. 1991, in *Insegnamenti XIV/2*, 1991, p. 1251, no. 3.

³ Pontifical Council for Health Pastoral Care (2001). *Church: Drugs and Drug Addiction. Pastoral Handbook*, LEV, n. no. 57.

⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 35.

cannot remain indifferent. The Church has a special responsibility to deal with the scourge of drug addiction and all the social problems that arise from it, because She wants to help every human being to live in freedom before God in the world. It is in this spirit that She has spoken about drugs on several occasions. She is also committed, as the many papal messages and pastoral experiences carried out by local communities around the world show.⁵

The fight against drug trafficking and abuse requires prevention policies coupled with broader programmes in the areas of sustainable development, security, and human rights. While prevention of drug use is a priority, it is also essential that governments work to curb illicit cultivation and production, promote the treatment of drug-related disorders, and reduce the damage associated with drug use. For, there are close links between the socio-economic situations of individuals, communities, and States and the drug problem. The start of drug use is more common in the wealthy strata of societies than in others, but the health consequences of drug use, the related disorders, the impact of trafficking and organized crime, and the production and manufacture of illicit drugs weigh more heavily on individuals and communities who live in more fragile and modest socio-economic conditions. Hence, sharing information about drugs is necessary in order to save lives.

Awareness of the seriousness of the problems associated with the drug phenomenon must be translated into new ethical habits so that young people can be offered incentives and concrete educational programs that develop their potential and educate them in the joy of depth and not of the ephemeral. For, according to Pope Francis, the Christian spirituality offers, in its approach, another way of understanding the quality of life and encourages a sober, prophetic, and contemplative lifestyle, capable of helping people to deeply appreciate things without being obsessed with consumption.⁶

It is clear, continues the Pope, that “Sobriety, when lived freely and consciously, is liberating.”⁷ Young people 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.”⁸

⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 371.

⁶ Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'* on the Care for Our Common Home, no. 222.

⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 223.

⁸ *Ibid.*

The challenges are enormous, but together we are moving forward with renewed commitment without losing hope. For, according to the Holy Father, “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 (...) 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.”⁹

⁹ Francis, **Address to the members of the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See**, 9 January 2020.